15¢ MAR.

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

TEX BROWN
PAUL S. POWERS
STEPHEN PAYNE
JOE ARCHIBALD
THELMA KNOLES

One More RIVER

A Novelet of the Oklahoma Land Rush

By NORRELL GREGORY

'FIVE MINUTES AND A NEW LIFE'

Some twenty years ago there came into my life a power so staggering that at first I could only wonder about it. The shackles which bound me for over forty years went a-shimmering. Up to that time, I had been one of the world's biggest failures. Then there came into my life a power the like of which I have never known. It was the power of God.

NOW—my every dream has come true. My poverty turned to unheard-of prosperity. All my fears were banished. Unhappiness was replaced with happiness. By daily use of this divine power, I have become wealthy, healthy, prosperous and happy. I actually talked with God.

You, too, can use this power. I mean just that—spend five minutes of your time to send me your name and address and read the six thousand word message that I am going to send you free—giving you the details of how you, too, can discover the Power of God in your life that will banish fear, distress and all the allied things that may be holding you back. Discover for yourself what this wonderful power can do for you. Send only your name and address—no money. We are quite reliable and interested only in finding for you the same power that Dr. Frank B. Robinson has used to make his life successful.

FREE **Psychiana, Dept. X-35-A, Moscow, Idaho, U. S. A.** **FREE**

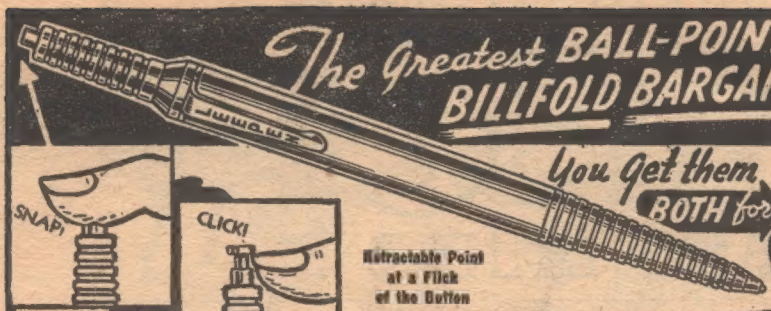
Please send me absolutely free—full details of how Dr. Frank B. Robinson discovered the Power of God in his life and how I may discover it in my life.

Name.....

Street and No.....

City.....State.....

The Greatest BALL-POINT PEN and BILLFOLD BARGAIN in America!

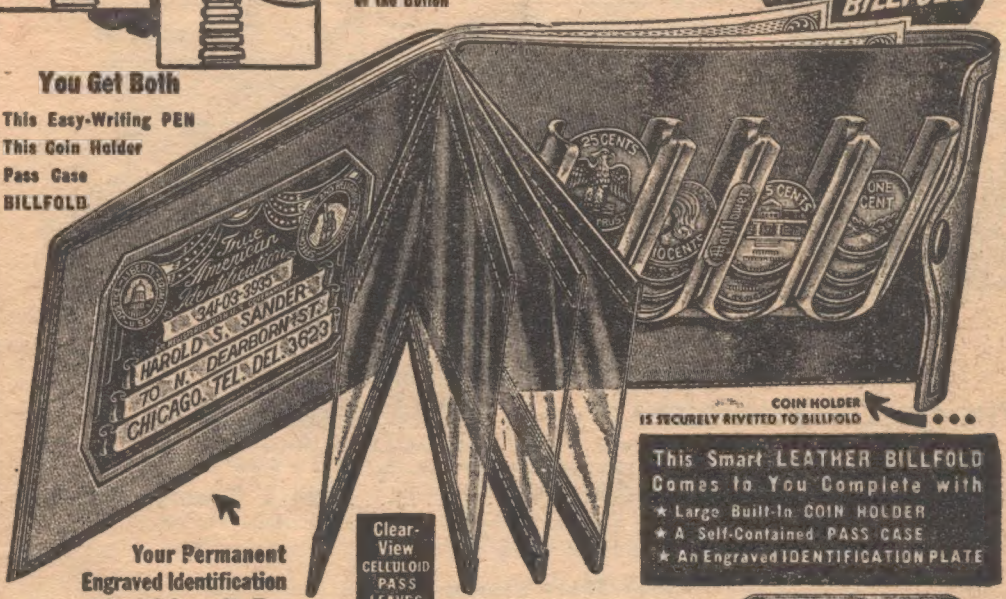


You get them BOTH for Only $1.98 PEN and BILLFOLD

Retractable Point at a Flick of the Button

You Get Both

This Easy-Writing PEN
This Coin Holder
Pass Case
BILLFOLD



COIN HOLDER IS SECURELY RIVETED TO BILLFOLD

This Smart LEATHER BILLFOLD Comes to You Complete with
- ★ Large Built-In COIN HOLDER
- ★ A Self-Contained PASS CASE
- ★ An Engraved IDENTIFICATION PLATE

Your Permanent Engraved Identification and Social Security Tag

Clear-View CELLULOID PASS LEAVES

You Also Receive This Three Color Social Security Plate
ENGRAVED With YOUR NAME, ADDRESS and SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

You SEND NO MONEY To Receive This Marvelous TRIPLE VALUE!

• Here without a doubt is the greatest merchandise bargain you'll be likely to see for years to come. Only our tremendous purchasing power and large volume "direct-to-you" method of distribution makes such a value possible. Shop around and see for yourself. Where else today can you get both an all-metal Ball Point Pen with a retractable point plus a genuine leather Billfold with built-in pass case and your engraved Three Color Social Security Plate—all for only $1.98. This type of Pen alone we believe is worth more than we ask for the Pen AND the Billfold on this offer.

• When you see this Pen and Billfold and examine their many outstanding features, you'll agree that we are giving you a value you won't be able to duplicate for a long time. Don't delay taking advantage of this big money-saving offer. These pens and billfolds are sure to sell out fast so it will be first come, first served. There's no risk. Your satisfaction is positively guaranteed.

Sensational Features!

THE PEN

- Push button . . . it writes! Click button . . . it retracts! Safe! Can't leak!
- Guaranteed to write up to 2 years without refilling.
- Dries as it writes. No smearing, no scratching. 6 to 8 clear carbons.

THE BILLFOLD

- 4 pocket built-in Pass Case, also celluloid window in front for Social Security Plate.
- Spacious currency compartment in back opens all the way.
- Button snap fastener. Easy to open and close. Holds securely.

NO MONEY! NO DEPOSIT! *Just Mail This Coupon!*

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART, Dept. 2600-B
1227 Loyola Ave., Chicago 26, Ill.

☐ Please rush me the Retractable Ball Point Pen and Pass Case Billfold with engraved 3-Color Social Security Plate. On arrival I will pay postman only $1.98 plus Federal Tax and a few cents postage and C.O.D. charges. If I am not positively thrilled and delighted in every way I can return within 10 days for full refund.

MY FULL NAME ..... (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

Social Security No. .....

☐ To save shipping charges I am enclosing in advance $1.98 plus 20c Federal Excise Tax (total $2.18). Please ship my order all postage charges prepaid.

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

VOL. XXXVII, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION March, 1948

Featured Complete Novelet

ONE MORE RIVER

By NORRELL GREGORY

When Jeff Dorey, from Kentucky, races a girl a dead heat in an Oklahoma Land Rush, their joint stake comes to mean much more to them than they ever expect! 13

Two Other Full-Length Novelets

THE CIRCLE 4 STRANGER ..... Stephen Payne 44

When Lafe Gordon hits Red Forks with his trail herd, Connie McGuire is torn between growing fondness for him—and the suspicion that he is a killer!

HANGNOOSE FOR A PRODIGAL ..... Paul S. Powers 58

Clint Coleman returns to Storm Ridge after three years in the penitentiary—ready to pit guns and fists against his ruthless rangeland enemies!

Five Short Stories

SKELETON TRAIL ..... Tom Parsons 33

Jim Burnett takes a hand when a stagecoach is eerily held up

A HELPING GUN ..... Tom Curry 35

Jimmy Farling sides a struggling farmer against a crooked range manager

I'LL MARRY YOU MANANA ..... Thelma Knoles 78

It seemed to Lucinda Garett as though Tomorrow would never come

GENERAL DELIVERY ..... Norman W. Hay 88

Sometimes a postmaster's curiosity can come in right handy

THE MARRY WIDOW ..... Joe Archibald 91

When Hattie Pringle's groom proves a wolf she is almost the goat

Special Features

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE ..... A Department 6

I WANT A WIFE (Branding Fire Song) ..... Tex Brown 76

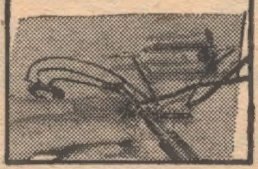
THE ENEMY IS HERE (A Message) ..... Kate Smith 113

THRILLING RANCH STORIES published every other month by Standard Magazines, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entire contents copyrighted, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, $.15; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter November 9, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

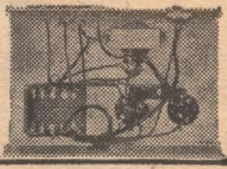
YOU BUILD THIS Radio Circuit early in Course with Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts I send; practice mounting, connecting, soldering Radio parts.

YOU PRACTICE Radio Servicing with this Tester built from parts I send. Also use it to help earn EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios.

YOU PRACTICE "FM" Servicing on this Frequency Modulation (FM) Signal Generator, built with parts I supply; learn by repairing circuit defects.



YOU BUILD THIS Vacuum Tube Power Pack, make changes which give you experience, learn how to locate and correct power pack troubles.

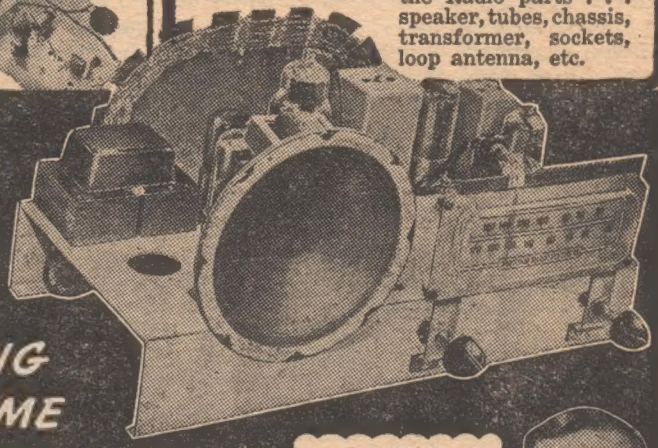


YOU BUILD THIS A. M. Signal Generator which provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments, gives you practical experience.

YOU PRACTICE signal tracing on this complete Superheterodyne Circuit you build with parts I send you, use it to conduct many tests and experiments.

YOU BUILD THIS MODERN SUPERHETERODYNE RECEIVER

YOU BUILD THIS complete, powerful Radio Receiver that brings in local and distant stations. N. R. I. gives you ALL the Radio parts . . . speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, sockets, loop antenna, etc.



LEARN RADIO

BY PRACTICING IN SPARE TIME

WITH BIG KITS OF PARTS I SEND YOU

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in RADIO—Television, Electronics," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY manuals that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even GREATER opportunities as public demand for Television, FM and Electronic devices continues to grow. Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do For You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my FREE 64-page book. Read the details about the Course, letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8C09, National Radio Institute, *Pioneer Home Study Radio School*, Washington 9, D. C.

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

MY COURSE INCLUDES FREQUENCY MODULATION, TELEVISION, ELECTRONICS

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Has Own Radio Service

"I have my own Radio and Television sales and servicing business. I get enough repair jobs to keep me going right along."—ALEXANDER KISH, 34 Pershing Avenue, Carteret, N. J.

Good Spare Time Business

"I have been getting receivers to repair right along, and with NRI methods I don't have to spend much time on them."—S. N. STRICKLAND, 191 Dale Homes, Portsmouth, Va.

VETERANS

You get this training in your own home under G. I. Bill. Mail Coupon.

GET BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept.8C09
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE Sample Lesson and 64-page book about how to win success in Radio and Television—Electronics. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

APPROVED FOR TRAINING UNDER GI BILL

A Department for Readers Conducted by TEX BROWN

SO YOU'VE been stayin' on a ranch out o' Tucson, Arizona, eh, Gertrude? Well, girl, you've sure had yore eyes and ears open, and you've learned a powerful lot o' early Arizona hist'ry!

Looks like you've been spendin' some time on the corral fence with one o' them gabby old Arizona "old-timers" 'stead o' flutterin' yore pretty lashes at jest the handsome young rannies on the ranch. For a girl o' sweet sixteen that's plumb unusual.

It sure tickles my old heart a heap to have you send me a snapshot o' yoreself settin' astride that high-steppin' calico pony. A durned pretty photo o' rider and hoss. Thank you kindly, Gertrude Mann!

U. S. Marshal Duffield

Yep' United States Marshal Duffield was sure a character, like you heard. He wasn't no U. S. Marshal when he lived in Tucson and took his meals at the old Shoo Fly restaurant, though, Gertrude. That's a mistake. His official title at that time was Mail Inspector, though he'd been a U. S. Marshal prior to his Tucson residence.

Not much actual information is to be had about Duffield before he came to Arizona, but there's one story o' his life in New York which has been pretty much accepted for fact.

Accordin' to the yarn, Duffield was a discovery o' President Abraham Lincoln, and was appointed marshal because o' the outstandin' courage he displayed in a New York riot durin' the Civil War. Seems Duffield was passin' along a street in which the rioters were havin' their own way, when he saw a Negro man runnin' for his life jest ahead o' some drunken pursuers who were bent on hangin' him to the nearest lamppost.

Duffield allowed the man to pass him, then planted hisself firmly in the path o' the oncomin' mob. He leveled his pistol and shot the man in the lead through his head, then hit two others as fast as he could fire his gun, stoppin' the mob. He was one o' the crack shots o' the age.

He Wore a Plug Hat

Duffield was outstandin' amongst men, in appearance and in his manner—a unusual character. He wore clothes to suit his own fancy, regardless o' the Western custom. It took a brave man to step out on the streets o' early Tucson in a plug hat, but Duffield wore his and made 'em like it.

Folks hated them black silk tile hats, and it was the custom to shoot 'em off the heads o' the wearers on sight, but nobody bothered the plug hat o' Duffield, nor offered any criticism.

The man was a bearcat in strength. He was six-foot three in height, had extremely broad shoulders, powerful muscles, and remarkable big fists. His complexion was dark, his hair black, and his eyes were keen as a briar and the color o' jet.

No man ever questioned his bravery. He was a amiable hombre, made lots o' strong friends and admirers, but at times he was disputatious and somewhat quarrelsome.

Fit No Pattern

Everything about Duffield was sort o' outstandin' and different; he wouldn't quite fit into any reg'lar pattern. Even the way he discharged his duties as Postal Inspector—in those days a dangerous job—was different and amusin', though it was entirely commendable.

He inspected a post office in one o' the dis-

(Continued on page 8)

They Never Knew It Was SO EASY To Play

Thousands Now Play Popular Songs Who Didn't Know a Note of Music Before

You, too, can learn your favorite instrument at home, without a teacher, this quick, easy, money-saving way

THINK of the fun YOU are missing! The popularity, friendship, good times! Why? Because you think it's *hard* to learn music. You have an idea that it's a slow, tedious task, with lots of boring drills and exercises.

That's not the twentieth-century way! Surely you've heard the news! How people all over the world have learned to play by a method so simple a child can understand it—so fascinating that it's like playing a game. Imagine! You learn without a teacher—in your spare time at home—at a cost of only a few cents a day! You learn by the famous print-and-picture method—every position, every move before your eyes in big, clear illustrations. You CAN'T go wrong! And best of all, you start playing real tunes almost at once, from the very first lesson.

No needless, old-fashioned "scales" and exercises. No confused, perplexing study. You learn to play by playing. It's thrilling, exciting, inspiring! No wonder hundreds of thousands of people have taken up music this easy way. No wonder enthusiastic letters like those reproduced here pour in from all over the world.

Sound interesting? Well, just name the instrument you'd like to play and we'll prove you CAN! (Instruments supplied when needed, Cash or Credit.) Mail the coupon or write. Do it now!

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
2943 Brunswick Bldg.
New York 10, N. Y.

Learned Quickly at Home. "I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time." *H. C. S., Calif.

Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

Send for FREE Booklet and Print and Picture Sample

See for yourself how this wonderful self-instruction method works. Sit down, in the privacy of your own home, with the interesting illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." No salesman will call—decide for yourself whether you want to play this easy way.

Invited to Parties. "Before I took your course I didn't know one note of music. Then three months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. The course is easy and interesting." *R. M., Vancouver, B. C.

Well Worth Money. "The course is fully self explanatory. When one is finished with it there is little one need learn. It is well worth the money and I fully believe you have the finest course on the market today." R. E. G., Clarksburg, W. Va.

Surprised Friends. "People who hear me play don't understand how I do it. They ask if I haven't had lessons from a teacher. To their surprise they find I haven't. I'm glad to be a student of your School." *M. H., Athol, Kans.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional models

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
2943 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument indicated below. Please send me your free booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home" and the free Print & Picture Sample.

Piano	Reed Organ	Modern Elementary Harmony
Guitar	Tenor Banjo	
Hawaiian Guitar	Ukulele	
Violin	Clarinet	Mandolin
Piano Accordion	Trombone	Practical Finger Control
Saxophone	Flute	
Trumpet, Cornet	Piccolo	

Have You This Instru. ?

Name.....
(PLEASE PRINT)

Address.....

City.....State.....

Note: If you are under 16 yrs. of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c—Stick coupon on penny postcard.

NOW... *Scientific Tests* give*

PROOF

no other leading brand of blades gives you

- **Better Steel**
- **Sharper Edges**
- **Better Shaves**
- **Lower Prices**

Single or Double Edge

Berkeley Blades

WHY PAY MORE? **15 for 25¢**

**details gladly furnished on request*

© Berkeley Industries, Inc. Jersey City 2, N. J.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" together with "Record of Invention" form—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

88-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

Can You Equal This Home for $2475

Shipped Direct from Our Mill

Save 30% to 40% on Your New Home..

Act Now!

Don't pay several hundred dollars more than necessary when you build a home! Buy it direct from our mill at our low factory price. We ship you the materials—lumber cut-to-fit, ready to erect. Paint, glass, hardware, nails, etc., all included in the price—no extra charges. Plans furnished—also complete building instructions. No wonder our customers write us that we saved them 30% to 40%. Prices subject to change without notice.

BIG BOOK of House Plans in Colors 25¢

Handsome Big CATALOGUE

Pictures wonderful homes in colors at money-saving prices. Designs to suit everyone. Send 25c for catalogue today.

LEWIS MANUFACTURING CO.

3583 Lafayette Ave., Bay City, Mich.

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

tricts in his jurisdiction one day, then said to the postmaster:

"You see, the postmaster-general is growlin' at me because there's so much thievin' goin' on along the line, so that I'm gittin' kind o' tired and must git the whole biz off me mind. And as I've looked into the whole thing and feel satisfied you're the thief, you'd better git pilin' out o' here without any more nonsense."

The postmaster was gone within twelve hours, and there was no more thievin' in Duffield's district. Maybe the thievin' amongst some postmasters could be explained, in a way. They were paid the sum o' twelve dollars a year!

They Never Drew Guns

This Postal Inspector was one o' that school o' gun-experts that never took the trouble to draw a gun, but simply shot right out o' their pockets.

The practice wasn't unusual. There was lots o' men in the early days o' the West who regarded drawin' a gun as a waste o' time.

From the pocket was how Duffield shot the famous bad-man, "Waco Bill." Now this here Waco Bill, a Texan, was a bad man, and tough as they come. Mostly he was full o' bad liquor, locally called "coffin varnish." And it was said o' him that he "wore crepe on his hat in memory o' his departed virtues."

A Challenge

Waco Bill got jealous o' all the admiration and respect accorded Duffield for his strength and shootin' ability. Primin' his nerves with coffin varnish, he strode about the village o' Tucson one day demandin' to know "Whar's Duffer? I want Duffer; he's my meat."

Now Duffield was standin' in one o' the groups that Waco so addressed. The boastin' words had hardly left the hiccoughin' braggart's lips before that big fist what could fell a ox shot from Duffield's shoulder. Down went Waco Bill, sprawlin' on the earth.

He'd no sooner touched the ground than his hand was seen to reach for his gun. He had it only halfway drawn from his holster when Duffield fired from his pocket, sendin' a bullet plowin' into Waco Bill's groin. That

(Continued on page 10)

You've got to compete with trained men!

The untrained man stands a slim chance today. Right now there are 14 million more highly skilled, experienced workers in the country than before the war.

Jam-packed schools and colleges are turning out record classes two and three times a year. The armed services continue to return thousands of technical experts to civilian life every month.

That's why it is so important that you get all the training you can—*now*, before "the squeeze" begins. Continue your formal education if you can. If not, investigate the opportunities offered by I. C. S.

For more than 56 years, I.C.S. has been training those determined to make good regardless of the odds. Leaders in nearly every field of business and industry are counted among the men and women who have taken I. C. S. courses. Their records of success prove the worth of sound, practical I. C. S. training. Don't gamble with your future. It may be later than you think. Mark and mail the coupon *today!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3966-L, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name_____ Home Address _____

City_____ State_____

Age_____ Present Position_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Special discount to World War II Veterans.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

NOW! The ONE-UNIT
HEARING AID
Thousands Have Waited for

The New ONE-UNIT
Beltone
MONO-PAC

THIS IS ALL YOU WEAR
NO SEPARATE BATTERY PACK
NO DANGLING BATTERY CORDS

The tiny new BELTONE Mono-Pac is about ⅓ size and weight of old-style hearing aids, yet so powerful you hear even *whispers!* Get helpful facts about this new *"miracle"* aid in valuable FREE book about deafness. No wonder so many thousands of hard-of-hearing people have switched to BELTONE ... Find out why for yourself!

ACCEPTED COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL MEDICINE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

BELTONE HEARING AID CO.
1450 W. 19th STREET
Dept. TFG-3, CHICAGO 8, ILLINOIS

FREE BOOKLET

Beltone Hearing Aid Co.
Dept. TFG-3, 1450 W. 19th St., Chicago 8, Ill.
Please send me FREE booklet about deafness and what can be done to overcome it.

Name_____
Address_____
Town_____ Zone____ State_____

LAW
STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 39 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 86-T, 645 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE
Borrow $50 to $300
Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow BY MAIL $50.00 to $300.00 this easy quick *confidential* way.
BY MAIL

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL!
Completely confidential and private
CONVENIENT MONTHLY PAYMENTS

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED
EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans MADE BY MAIL. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details FREE in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE COMPANY
303 Marine Bldg., Dept. A-82, New Orleans 12, La.

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 8)

took the fight out o' the Texas badman.

Calmly, without showin' a trace o' anger in voice or manner, Duffield walked over to the cursin' Texan and made him a Chesterfieldian bow.

"My name's Duffield, sir," he said, "and them there's me visitin' card."

Concealed Weapons

Every man wore firearms in them days, and if a order was issued forbiddin' the wearin' o' guns in certain places, the average man concealed his weapons on his person some place and went ahead as usual.

There was a certain judge in Tucson, name o' Titus, who disliked Duffield intensely, it's said. It was through Duffield's wearin' concealed weapons to a baile where every man was supposed to go on a "peace footin' " (all guns left at home) that the Judge found excuse to prefer charges against him and hail him into court. Judge Titus claimed Duffield had partly drawn a pistol on him, though the charge was for wearin' concealed weapons.

Lemme say right here that Duffield was actually a sort o' walkin' arsenal. He had guns concealed all over his person habitually —in the arm-holes o' his waistcoat, in his bootlegs, his hip-pockets, and even at the back o' his neck. It's said as many as eleven guns were concealed on him at times.

Well, when Duffield was brought to trial the courtroom was sure packed with interested spectators. Court opened and proceeded in a impressive and judicious style until the first witness for the state was called.

Six-gun Testimony

This witness, name o' Charles Brown, took the stand and, under oath, was told to show the judge and jury jest how the prisoner Duffield had drawn his revolver at the baile.

Whereupon the witness cleared his throat and proceeded.

"Yuh see, Jedge," he said, "the way he drawed was jest this way . . . " And at that he drew a six-shooter, fully cocked, from the holster on his hip.

The courtroom burst into loud laughter, and the trial was nolle prossed. The judge

(Continued on page 103)

Learn RADIO TELEVISION, ELECTRONICS by SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING

Let NATIONAL SCHOOLS of Los Angeles, a practical Technical Resident Trade School for over 40 years, train you for today's unlimited opportunities in Radio.

You receive all parts, including tubes, for building this fine, modern Superheterodyne Receiver. This and other valuable standard equipment becomes your property.

these two FREE books will tell you how

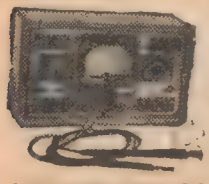
Good Jobs Await the Trained Radio Technician

You are needed in the great, modern Radio, Television and Electronics industry! Trained Radio technicians are in constant and growing demand at excellent pay—in Broadcasting, Communications, Television, Radar, Research Laboratories, Home Radio Service, etc. National Schools Master Shop Method Home Study Course, with newly added lessons and equipment, can train you in your spare time, *right in your own home,* for these exciting opportunities. Our method has been proved by the remarkable success of National Schools-trained men all over the world.

You Learn by Building Equipment with Standard Radio Parts We Send You

Your National Schools Course includes not only basic theory, but *practical* training as well—*you learn by doing.* We send you complete standard equipment of professional quality for building various experimental and test units. You advance step by step until you are able to build the modern superheterodyne receiver shown above, which is yours to keep and enjoy. You perform more than 100 experiments—build many types of circuits, signal generator, low power radio transmitter, audio oscillator, and other units. The Free Books shown above tell you more about it—send for them today!

NOW! NEW PROFESSIONAL MULTITESTER INCLUDED!



This versatile testing instrument is portable and complete with test leads, batteries and tubes. Simple to operate, accurate and dependable. You will be able to quickly locate trouble and adjust the most delicate circuits. You can use the Multitester at home or on service calls. It is designed to measure AC and DC volts, current, resistance and decibles. You will be proud to own and use this valuable professional instrument.

GET THE DETAILS—SEND THE COUPON ➤

Lessons and Instruction Material Are Up-to-date, Practical, Interesting.

National Schools Master Shop Method Home Training gives you basic and advanced instruction in all phases of Radio, Television and Electronics. Each lesson is made easy to understand by numerous illustrations and diagrams. All instruction material has been developed and tested in our own shops and laboratories, under the supervision of our own engineers and instructors. A free sample lesson is yours upon request — use the coupon below.

Here's Just a Few of the Interesting Facts you Learn with the FREE MANUAL

1. Routine for diagnosing Radio Troubles.
2. Preliminary Inspection of Receivers.
3. How to Test and Measure Voltages.
4. How to Test Speaker in Audio Stages.
5. How to Trace the Circuit and Prepare Skeleton Diagram.
6. Complete Reference Table for Quickly Locating Receiver Troubles.

VETERANS

If you are a veteran, qualified for training under the G.I. Bill, check the coupon for a Special Bulletin.

G. I. APPROVED

NATIONAL SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES 37, CALIFORNIA EST 1905

MAIL OPPORTUNITY COUPON FOR QUICK ACTION

National Schools, Dept. TG-3 — Paste on a postcard
4000 S. Figueroa, Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Mail me FREE the books mentioned in your ad including a sample lesson of your course. I understand no salesman will call on me.

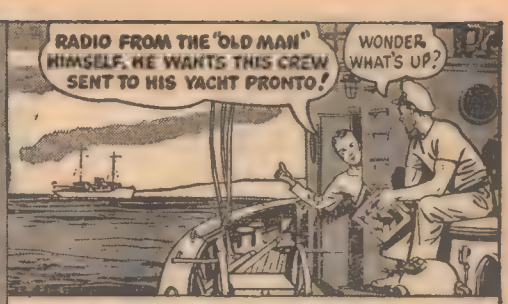
NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

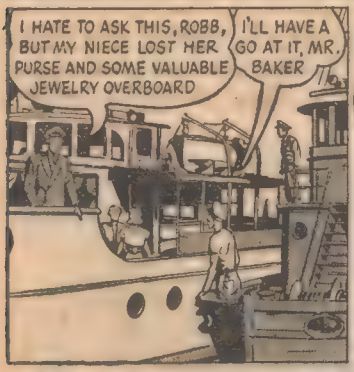
CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

☐ Check here if Veteran of World War II

BILL FOUND MORE THAN TREASURE WHEN • • •



CHIEF DIVER BILL ROBB, EX-NAVY SALVAGE OFFICER, IS RESTING BETWEEN DIVES TO A SUNKEN SHIP IN HOLLISTER BAY WHEN • • •



ONE MORE RIVER

A novelet by

NORRELL GREGORY

When Jeff Dorey, from Kentucky, races a girl a dead heat in an Oklahoma Land Rush, their joint stake comes to mean more than they ever expect!

CHAPTER I: *Night Riders*

THEY CAMPED along a small watercourse a few miles above the Oklahoma line where the April grass was good and there was wood for a fire. They were the Dorey boys, from Kentucky—Jeff twenty-six, and Sam only fourteen.

By a prearranged schedule Jeff took care of the cooking while Sam wrangled the wagon mules and took care of the fine thoroughbred mare they had brought to use in the Run. Sam, in particular, expected great things of that mare.

After supper, while Jeff was poring over one of the "Blackstone Commentaries"—he had ambitions to study law—Sam thought about the Run. Throughout the entire trip it had been his sole obsession. He had asked his elder brother a hundred thousand questions as to just how it would be conducted.

Jeff closed the law book—it was getting too dark to read—and attempted to make some things clear to this kid brother of his who was far older than his years indicated.

"On the seventeenth of April everybody will line up at the Jump-off. A cannon will be fired at Fort Reno, and the man with the fastest horse gets the best piece of land in Oklahoma—maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe?" Sam said crossly. "We got the fastest horse, ain't we?"

Jeff smiled. Sam had always been that way—opinionated.

"There'll be plenty of fast horses there, Sam," he explained, "and there's other things to consider. Sooners, for example."

"What's them?"

"People that slip in ahead of time and hide out till opening day. Then all they got to do is drive their stake and rub soapsuds on their horse to make him look like he's lathered up."

"Low-down sneaks!" said Sam. "I'd know how to handle them." His eyes went to the old Baker shotgun leaning against a wagon wheel.

"Sam, you're a heathen," Jeff said mildly.

"And you're my brother," retorted Sam.

The fire burned out and dusk came. Sam got drowsy and crawled under the wagon where their blankets were spread, taking with him the old Baker.

Jeff shook his head. The old Baker was double-barreled, full choke and kicked like a tormented mule, but Sam had taken it to bed with him every single night since they had left Kentucky, fully expecting to have use for it before morning. He never had, yet not for a single night had he ever relaxed his vigilance.

IT WAS NOT amusing to Jeff, because he knew it reflected Sam's up-bringing. It was the old feudist blood that ran in both their veins, and Jeff was not proud of it. He knew that it had been born of ignorance and seeded in decadence.

This long trip had revealed, as nothing else, the extreme narrowness of their up-bringing. Sam was too young to understand it. Sam had been far too young even to remember the soul-searing tragedy that had left them parentless.

Now as the full moon sailed up over the Kansas flatness Jeff thought of their past, and speculated on their future. Before them was a land that was lusty and new, untouched, he hoped, by those old and debasing things which he hoped they had left behind forever. And yet he understood that it was a gamble. If he failed in the Run, how could he expect to make a home for Sam?

Down Caldwell way a cow bawled long and lonesomely. Along the timber-fringed stream whippoorwills were calling. Jeff Dorey could hear the mules and the mare cropping grass. He could hear Sam's even and deep breathing under the wagon. All the small night noises that usually went unnoticed seemed suddenly magnified a thousand times. A vague unrest, an unexplainable tension, took hold of him.

He stood up, a tall and gangling young man with a dark and somewhat ragged crop of hair. In the moonlight the features of his face were sharply etched. There was both a vague maturity and a nobility stamped there, for there was good blood back along the Dorey line. Far back.

The little night wind died and he was conscious of a faint pulsing sound beating up against the moon. Down by the watercourse his mare suddenly threw up her head and stood motionless, the moon glistening on her round barrel. She had, he knew, also caught the sound.

It seemed to flow through the earth, and it increased quickly in volume. Then he knew what it was—the pulse-stirring beat of a horse's hoofs, coming all out.

Across the creek to the south the ribbon of road led over a small knoll. He saw the animal as it glanced over this knoll, just a speeding black splotch, with the saddle either empty or the rider very low in the kak.

The speeding horse glanced down into the shadows of the timber-fringed watercourse, and Jeff heard it hit the crossing a bucketing slap. Then the mount went off for the roadway, his long legs spanning prodigious distances.

The horse came out of the shadows, picking up speed again. Jeff was in the roadway ahead of it, his arms thrown high. Senseless, the animal came on, grunting, blind with panic.

"Caught him, did you?" said the spokesman. "Just hand up those reins!"

"Ho, boy!" Jeff shouted.

The horse reared straight up, a high and black pillar against the moon. Jeff leaped for the bridle, caught it, and was dragged a full rod before he could stop the insensate animal.

Panting, trembling in every muscle, the horse stood, now tractable. Under the moonlight the empty saddle held a wetly black sheen. Jeff's exploring hand came away touched with stickiness.

Up near the wagon his mare neighed ringingly, and he saw that her head pointed, not toward him, but southward again.

He stood motionless, listening, the reins lax in his hand. First, only the rhythmic panting of the horse, the little squeal of leather from the saddle, then sound again flowed through the earth. Swiftly the sound resolved into the strike of not one, but of several horses, coming with a controlled velocity.

He led the horse toward the wagon.

"Sam!" he called. "Roll out!"

Clutching the Baker, out from beneath the wagon came Sam. He cocked an attentive ear toward the sound of those coming riders, cast a look at the riderless horse Jeff was leading, then faded behind the wagon.

Over the rise came four riders, a close-packed and speeding black knot. They plunged down into the shadows of the timber and Jeff heard them hit the water a swooshing strike.

Out they came on the near side of the stream, still a close-packed knot, and were at the point of hurtling by the encampment when one of them must have caught the sheen of the moon on the white wagon top. An up-tossed hand brought the whole group to a sliding, grinding stop.

From behind the wagon came Sam's laconic voice.

"Want for me to mow into 'em, Jeff?"

"No!"

AS THE GROUP consulted out there, their voices made a subdued and ominous murmur. Then, as one, they turned towards the wagon, spreading a little and keeping, Jeff noticed, their backs to the moon.

It was a disquieting maneuver, but even though their faces could not be seen as they approached, their personalities were distinctly individual. One was a tall figure with sharply cut and high shoulders, and he wore his hat at a rakish angle; another was a massive and postlike man, another slender, moving pliantly to every motion of his horse. The fourth was so slight and small as to appear almost boyish.

Tall-hat acted as a spokesman and his voice matched his person—chipped, sharp, almost insolent.

"Caught him, did you? Just hand up those reins and we'll be moving along."

"This horse is a mare, mister," Jeff said.

A little silence, then Tall-hat laughed, a jarring brittle note.

"Mare, then," he said. "The reins, friend."

"Mister," Jeff said, "did you know this saddle was covered with blood?"

Paralysis hit the four of them. Then Tall-hat's hand dropped from the saddle-horn and he leaned a little forward. His voice now held a low and wicked cadence:

"Hand up those reins!"

Jeff then realized that he had mistaken the true kidney of these men, saw that they were armed, and that there was that about them which signified they were entirely indifferent as to how they used their arms. He knew that Sam would shoot if he gave the sign, but he knew also that at that distance the old Baker scattered not at all. Sam could, and probably would, make a mess of two of them, but he couldn't get them all. Jeff was suddenly assailed with a fear that Sam would shoot.

"Don't shoot, Sam!" he said quickly.

He was at the point of handing up the reins when Sam acted on his own initiative. Never had Jeff heard the sound of a gun lock sound so loud and sinister as it did now.

Again paralysis hit these four men. Then Tall-hat's head moved toward the wagon and Jeff knew he was calculating their chances. Behind the wagon, Sam eared back the second hammer on the Baker, and that tipped the scales.

Those men were wise enough to know that there was but one gun with a double lock—a shotgun.

Tall-hat laughed, the same jarring note. "Have it your own way," he said carelessly. "I see the horse is a mare, after all. Keep her and the devil with you!"

Without touching a rein he kneed his horse about, rode away south, followed by the other three. Not once did they look back. Jeff drew a deep breath of relief and Sam came from behind the wagon, the Baker still at full cock.

"Sam, that was nice work, but awful risky."

"Huh!" said Sam disdainfully. "Think I could miss four of 'em at that distance with a ten-gauge?"

"You had only two shots, Sam. What would have happened after the shotgun was empty."

"They'd all be dead," Sam said.

"Including," Jeff said drily, "ourselves."

Sam wouldn't argue the point. "What you reckon become of the rider, Jeff?"

"I think," replied Jeff, "that he must have fallen off when the horse hit the crossing. Let's find out."

CHAPTER II

Boom Town

A LANTERN was needed in the heavy shadows of the crossing, and by its light Jeff and Sam found the rider, lying in two feet of water. Jeff knew that even if the man hadn't been dead when he fell off his horse, he was now, because his face had been completely submerged.

He carried him back to the wagon and laid him on the ground, face up. In the moonlight his face assumed a peculiar transparency, as if all the passions and hates and desires of life had been suddenly washed away, returning him to the undefiled state belonging only to childhood. Young, tranquil and handsome.

"They laid for him, looks like," Jeff said soberly, "and got him cold."

Sam knelt down and examined him more closely.

"Four bullets in him," he said. "These cowboys out here ain't such a much. In Kentucky we wouldn't needed but one."

"You're a heathen, Sam," Jeff repeated, without heat.

He dropped on one knee and went through the dead man's clothing. The pockets yielded little enough. A pack of playing cards, a small amount of money, a watch, and among other lesser things, a few old and water-soaked letters. Jeff pored over them some time, Sam waiting patiently.

"His name," Jeff said, "seems to have been Bob McAllister. And from these letters, I judge he one time amounted to something."

"What'd they kill him for?" Sam wanted to know.

Jeff shook his head. "Not money, anyway. Maybe he knew something they were afraid he would tell. Or maybe it was a girl. You can never tell." He stood up. "I expect I'd better ride in to town and report this tonight?"

"Why?" said Sam. "He's dead and he'll still be dead in the morning. We know we didn't do it."

"We do," Jeff admitted, "but other people don't. We're strangers, Sam, and it wouldn't look well for us to go into town with a dead man in our wagon, leading his horse, would it?"

"Save a trip," said practical Sam.

"Saddle our mare," ordered Jeff.

Sam knew better than to argue when Jeff used that tone. Jeff had raised him since he was four years old and, while an indulgent brother, could also be firm. Now as Sam clubbed after the mare, Jeff climbed into the wagon to spruce up a little.

He put on his best suit, a black broadcloth, a white shirt and a low-crowned dark hat. He didn't look unlike a young preacher, thus attired, but the heavy pistol he buttoned under his coat was hardly appropriate for the ministry.

Sam brought up the mare, dancing and snorting dew from her nostrils. She blew a blast of distaste at the still figure on the ground, but she was too well trained to shy. With one foot in the stirrup, Jeff paused.

"I'll be back by daylight, Sam," he said. "You'll be all right here."

"I ain't worried about myself," Sam retorted, "but suppose you don't get back?"

"I'll get back," Jeff assured, and hit the saddle.

Gravel from the blooded mare's driving hoofs spanked the wagon box. She was so full of run that, after crossing the stream, Jeff let her have her way, welcoming the strong push of the night air against his face.

Serene and high sailed the moon, and the mare's flying hoofs quickened and quickened.

Long before entering the town of Caldwell, Jeff encountered the gigantic encampment of people waiting there for the Jump-off. The sea of tents and wagon-tops, white under the moon, stretched all the way around that small Border town, and far beyond. People not yet asleep glanced at this tall young man, astride a shimmering mare, as he rode through, but no one spoke to him or

made any attempt to stop him.

It was a staggering accumulation of people, and Jeff felt a humbleness and an awe. It made him realize, as nothing else ever had, the vastness and strength of his country. Proud, too, to be a citizen of a nation big enough to put enough people in one place, like this, to populate an entire state, and yet never miss them from the places they had left.

Caldwell, when he reached it, was a seething, surging caldron. Saloons, dance-halls, gambling dives, other places were all doing a round-the-clock business and he knew that even these, accenting the more sordid side, were also the sign of a virile people.

JEFF turned the mare into the dark maw of a barn and when she threshed thunderous hoofs on the boarded entry, a nighthawk, lantern in the crook of his arm, appeared and reached for her bridle.

Jeff dismounted. "Put her in a box stall," he directed.

"Yes, sir," said the nighthawk, and led the mare clacking toward the back of the barn.

Jeff turned and stood in the board entry, facing the surging elements of this small Border town, hitherto unknown to him as well as thousands of others. Now it held the spotlight of the nation, and probably of the world.

As he stood there he heard wild rumors bruited about, all pertaining to this fabulous land gift. He heard that Texans on the south, tired of waiting for opening day, were coming into the Territory in spite of troops, Hades or high water; that beaten cattlemen had hired gun-hands to Sooner their old and now void leases; that Boomers had been hiding out in plum thickets for years, waiting for this opening day. These and many more rumors were all stimulating, he thought, but probably false.

The nighthawk came clacking back up to the entry and stood beside him, dwarfed by Jeff's rangy height.

"Here for the Run?" the man said engagingly.

Jeff nodded. It was always the first question, and entirely needless.

"Is there a sheriff in town?" he asked.

The barn man pointed. "Marshal's office is right over there."

Jeff nodded his thanks and stepped into the street where cowboys, perhaps conscious of a last chance to kick up their heels, flung wild-eyed cow ponies through the streets, shooting and shouting. Their day was about done.

In a small office sandwiched between a dance-hall and a hotel he found a gaunt, graying man tipped back in a chair with his eyes closed. A law badge gleamed on the lapel of his unbuttoned vest, and a heavy six-shooter sagged at his waist.

When the man opened his eyes Jeff saw that he was not drowsy, but bone tired.

"What is it, son?" he asked, not unkindly.

"Do you know anyone by the name of Bob McAllister?"

The sheriff's heavy eyelids fluttered. "Yes, I know Bob. Why?"

"I found him in a creek a few miles north of town."

The chair legs struck the floor. "Drowned?"

"Shot."

The sheriff's gray eyes probed deep. "Stranger in these parts?" he asked.

Jeff told him who he was and where he was from. The sheriff nodded.

"Any idea who done it?" he asked.

Jeff described the four men, and a gleam shot through the sheriff's eyes. He stood up, reaching well over the six-foot mark, and turned to the window where he could look upon the surging, animated street.

"Son," he said, "you, like them thousands out there, are here for the Run. You're overjoyed because Oklahoma is at last opened for settlement. I wonder how many of you ever think of the other side."

"The cattlemen's side?" said Jeff.

"Them," said the sheriff, "but in particular the men that used to work for them. Boys like Bob. He had a good job in Oklahoma, and a bright future. He could have married his boss' girl. But when the Government voided them leases it broke every cattleman in Oklahoma, and it put a lot of young fellows to the bad. They went wild. Think of that, some time."

"I have, Sheriff," replied Jeff.

"If you have," replied the lawman, "you're one in a thousand. Where is your camp?"

Jeff told him.

"I'll be out," said the sheriff. "Think you would know them four if you was to see them again."

"I think I would."

"Take a look around town before you go back to camp. Let me know if you see them."

Out on the boardwalk, Jeff stood a while thinking of what the sheriff had told him. The sheriff was not only a strange man, but what was more rare, apparently an intelligent one.

He entered the crowded lobby of a hotel where a harassed clerk was telling people there were no more rooms. To the left of the stairway was an opening labeled, "Sample Room."

He knew that was only a polite term for a bar, and went in. People three deep lined the bar, and back, a short stair led to a low balcony, where there were chairs and tables for more discriminating customers. Bar girls in short skirts and demurely high-necked blouses ran up and down these stairs, serving these tables.

The balcony was well populated, and even before Jeff found an empty table he saw the four men who had paid his camp the nocturnal visit. They were seated at a table near the back wall. He knew he could not be mistaken. There was the tall man, the heavy one, the thin, and the little one. The latter was no bigger than Sam, but there was nothing boyish about his face. It was too hard and too wicked.

CHAPTER III
Red Moon

JEFF found an unoccupied table and sat down. A bar girl appeared instantly. She was young and she was disturbingly pretty.

"What for you, sir?" she said.

Jeff gave an order because he knew it was required here. As she turned down the stairs she gave him a quick and measuring look, and Jeff found himself wondering what particular piece of bad luck had put her here.

A chain scraped the floor and boot falls crossed the floor. Tall-hat spun a chair with his boot toe, straddled it, and sat down facing Jeff across the table. He was a magnificently built man and there was an insolent look in his dark eyes.

"Where," he asked, "have I seen you before?"

Jeff knew the man was dead because his face was submerged

Jeff shrugged, wishing he had his pistol in a more accessible position.

"Your guess is as good as mine, stranger. Ever been in Kentucky?"

"Kentucky?" Tall-hat laughed, the same jarring note Jeff had heard earlier that evening. "Never. My mistake, stranger."

He arose, threw a look toward the other three and went indolently down the stairs. At the foot he paused to say something to the girl bringing Jeff's order, then moved on through the barroom. The other three arose and moved after him.

The bar girl put Jeff's order on the table. She was full-bodied and deft. Close up, he could see faint shadows of weariness under her eyes.

"Why don't you sit down and rest a little?" he said.

She gave him that quick and enigmatic look again, then she sat down opposite him, her arms on the table, round and smooth and firm. Her eyes, clear and direct, studied him with a frank wonder.

"Do you work here because you like it or because you have to?" he said.

She resented the question. "Why?" she asked coolly.

He smiled faintly. "I was just thinking that you were out of place."

"And I was just thinking the same thing about you," she retorted. She started to rise.

"Don't go yet, please," he said quickly. "Who was the tall man who spoke to you as you came up the stairs?"

She hesitated, then said, "That was Grat Morelock."

"And those other three with him?"

A different light came into her eyes, wisdom and a hardness. "Mister, have you got a badge hid somewhere? If you have, show it."

"I'm no badge toter," Jeff said earnestly. "Just a plain country boy from the Kentucky mountains. The name is Dorey—Jeff Dorey."

Her eyes softened instantly. "Kentucky!" she said. "I thought you sounded like a Kentuckian. I used to—" she caught herself. "What interest have you in Grat Morelock?"

Jeff hesitated himself. Then he said, "Do you know anybody by the name of Bob McAllister?"

She nodded, watching him closely. "Bob used to be a nice boy before—before he hit hard luck. Why?"

"When did you see him last?"

"This evening. Why all these questions?"

"Bob a friend of yours?"

She froze up. "Mister," she said, "I know the Government has hundreds of deputies around here who keep their badges in their pockets. You'll not get any more information out of me."

"Bob," said Jeff, "is dead."

That hit her hard. She paled and caught her lower lip in her teeth, stared at him a moment, then rose and left the balcony. She did not return, and after waiting some time Jeff paid one of the other girls and left the hotel.

THE SHERIFF'S office was closed, so he got his mare from the barn and headed northward, pondering deeply. Things just didn't add up, he thought. He wondered if Bob McAllister had keen killed over that girl, and he wondered what stroke of bad luck had put her down to serving tables at a bar. She was, he believed, a little thoroughbred; if he knew anything about either horses or women.

He was through the camp and the mare was moving along at a cradlelike rack in the open country when shadows on either side of the road swam into motion. Four horses, effectively blocking the road, jerked him rudely out of his brown reverie.

"Where to, stranger?"

It was the mocking voice of Grat Morelock, and in the failing light of the blood-red moon, Jeff could see those high-cut shoulders, that rakishly tilted hat. He had the sickening realization that he had ridden stupidly into a trap that even Sam would have been alert against.

He did not reply at once, because he guessed that in the now indifferent light they were not entirely certain of his identity. They were waiting to hear his voice—then he would get it, just as Bob McAllister had got it.

The Kentucky-bred mare was trained and she was almost as fast as a bullet. She would start, full speed, at a touch, turn on a dime and whirl at another. He knew his chance of whirling and getting back to town was negligible; also his chance of getting his buttoned-down gun into action. These men were set for such moves. His only chance was straight ahead, through them, depending on the speed of his mare.

Morelock's horse was ahead, almost broadside. From a dead stop the mare went into

his horse like a thousand-pound projectile. Shoulder smote shoulder and Morelock's horse was spun like a top and went down at the side of the road.

Through the opening with hardly a check rushed the mare. Flat along her neck Jeff ran through a furious but wild fusillade. Lead sang over his head.

Then he was in the open and the mare settled to a full racing stride. He expected instant pursuit and welcomed it. Let them try to run him down now!

Pursuit did not come. Instead, a man's harsh command was shouted, then came the spiteful crack of a rifle. Lead winged over him and the mare ducked her head and leaped sideward.

One of them had seen the futility of trying to run down the mare and had cleared the road behind him, pulled a saddle gun and cracked down. That head work, Jeff guessed, came from Grat Morelock.

A second shot came almost instantly, a third and a fourth. The mare squealed and broke stride badly. Instantly Jeff swung bolt upright. Better to give them a high target than to have the mare hit. If she came down, they would have him.

Behind, the rifle cracked with a steady and devilish deliberation. He counted the shots—four, five, six. How many did the magazine hold? All high—seven—then a sledge-hammer blow slammed him forward along the mare's neck and he felt the reins slip through his fingers.

The mare slowed, but she did not break stride. Lying along her neck with his arms hanging like ropes Jeff felt the last vestige of strength drain out of him.

He sagged to the left, falling, and the mare suddenly veered, seemed to dip and come up under him, throwing him back. He sagged to the right, and again she veered and dipped, coming up under him again. He knew what she was doing, but he was powerless to help her.

The lethal spang of the rifle had ceased, or else the growing roar in his head had obscured it. The mare was floating. Floating on a cloud. No effort, no strain, just floating. . . .

AT CAMP, Sam had neither slept nor let the old Baker out of his hands for a moment. It had been a trying vigil, even inured as he was to the harder aspects of life. For himself he had no worry, but he was deeply worried about Jeff. Jeff, he thought, was too unsuspicious of others.

He saw the moon setting, blood-red, and that added to his premonitions. He was full of such things, and Jeff's efforts to purge them from his mind had not been entirely successful. So when a little later he heard the first wild burst of gunfire to the south, he was mightily perturbed, but not surprised. Then when that first wild outburst of shooting was followed by the deadly, dropping fire of a rifle he knew positively that Jeff had run into a trap.

He stood by the wagon in the growing dawn, expecting at any moment to hear the furious roll of horses' hoofs. When they did not materialize, he anticipated the worst.

Dawn at the ford where the shadows were still deep he heard a horse neigh. His heart jumped and his grip tightened on the Baker. Then, as stealthily as any Indian, he moved toward the ford, the Baker at full cock. Day was close now.

When he reached the sharp lift out of the water he saw the mare standing at the edge, directly below him. Jeff was stretched full length along her neck, his arms hanging like ropes.

Sam was pretty tough-minded, but now the Baker escaped from his hands, and being cocked, went off when it hit the ground. The double charge cut down a sapling as large as a man's arm. Sam let the gun lay and went down the bank at a frantic crablike scramble.

He saw the bloody mass that was Jeff's shock of hair and he seized Jeff by the shoulders and held him while the mare scrambled up the bank.

CHAPTER IV
The Border

HOLDING Jeff in the saddle, as he walked along, Sam saw the long bullet burn on the mare's neck and his face went bleak as he envisaged the leaden hail through which she and Jeff had passed.

At the wagon Sam pulled Jeff from the saddle and was carried down by the plunge of Jeff's dead weight. Jeff was heavier than he looked.

Sam found that his brother's head wound was the only one that Jeff had suffered and,

schooled in such matters, knew it was not necessarily serious. The bullet had struck near the top of Jeff's head, at the back, gone under the scalp and come out just above the hairline in front.

Sam dashed to the creek for water which he flung over Jeff's head, then washed it carefully. The wound was still oozing blood, so he bound Jeff's head with some muslin, then got the jug of pure Kentucky corn from the wagon. He was trying to spill some down Jeff's throat when Jeff came to.

Jeff pushed the jug away with petulant weakness.

"Never try to pour whisky down an unconscious man, Sam," he said weakly. "Might strangle him."

Sam grinned a little. "Guess you ain't so bad off," he said. "You can still lecture."

Jeff pulled himself to a sitting position and propped his back against the wagon. He looked at his mare a long time.

"Sam, I found out something. Horses can think."

"Huh!" said Sam scornfully. "That ain't no discovery. I've knowed that all my life. That mare, when she come to the bank down there, knowed you would fall off in the water if she tried to climb it, so she just stood and nickered for me."

Jeff nodded. "After what happened tonight, I can believe even that, Sam. She kept me in the saddle when I couldn't lift a finger."

"Who was it got you? Them same four?"

Jeff nodded. He didn't want to discuss it, because he knew he should have been more alert. Should have known that Morelock had recognized him in the Sample Room.

"Sheriff been here?" he asked.

"Nobody's been here. Jeff, what do you intend to do about it?"

"Report it to the sheriff when he comes. It's his job to take care of such things, not ours, Sam."

Sam looked thoroughly disgusted, but he said nothing at first. Then he blurted:

"That ain't the way they handle such things in Kentucky!"

"This is not Kentucky," Jeff reminded.

"No," retorted Sam, "but it's a durned sight worse."

Jeff was silent. He was beginning to think that he had made a mistake in coming West. This country *was* worse than Kentucky—for Sam.

The sheriff appeared soon after sunrise, driving a spring wagon. He had some blankets in the wagon and after he had climbed out he stood a long time looking down into the face of the dead man. Almost, Jeff thought, he shed a tear.

"Yes," he said, "that's Bob."

He gathered the dead man up in his arms, placed him gently in the spring wagon and covered him decently. Jeff could see that the lawman was hit hard.

"Sheriff," Jeff said, "we've got a jug of Kentucky corn here, if you would like a drink."

"I could use some of that," said the sheriff.

After he had taken a pull at the jug he put his back against a wagon wheel and his face looked grayer in the full light of morning.

"I don't know," he said, "what will become of all these young cowhands now. There's no other range for them. The range is gone. All they know is how to ride and rope and shoot a little, and they're too proud to beg. It looks like Oklahoma is going to grow a new crop—a crop of outlaws."

"Oklahoma is going to have something else, too. Sheriff," Jeff said. "The law."

The sheriff spoke without bitterness. "I represent the law, and yet I know it was the same law that opened Oklahoma to settlement that is making outlaws."

"The same law will hang them some day, Sheriff." Jeff said, "because the law is coming to this country."

THE sheriff looked at him with a direct bitterness. He seemed to notice Jeff's bandaged head for the first time.

"Run into them in town last night?"

"No," said Jeff. "They laid for me on my way back to camp. One of them is named Morelock. I don't know the names of the others, but I imagine I could find out."

"I know their names and I know their records. And this"—the sheriff spoke with grim fatality—"will be *one* case where the law will take care of them. But I doubt if they hang."

Struck by his apparent bitterness, Jeff said, "You must have known Bob McAllister pretty well, Sheriff."

"I should," replied the sheriff. "He was my son."

He tied his son's horse to the wagon, climbed heavily into the seat and drove away.

"I'd sure hate to have that old man gunning for me!" Sam said.

Jeff put his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Sam, you was too young to understand what happened to our parents, but here is something mighty close to it. The only difference is that the sheriff happens to be a law officer, and our father wasn't. The main reason I decided to leave Kentucky was to get you away from inherited feuds before you got old enough to know about them and take them up."

"I can't see that this country is much different from Kentucky," replied Sam. "Only difference is back there four men would never lay for just *one*. It would be the other way around."

"Oh, Sam, you don't understand what I'm trying to tell you! Of course there's killing and violence everywhere, especially in a country like this. But we don't have to become a part of it, like we were in Kentucky. We can start clean here. We won't have years and years of old hates and feuds back of us. Can't you understand that? I wanted to get you away from those things before you got old enough to take them up."

"You think I would?" said Sam scornfully.

"Sam, I know you would. You've got more of that old blood in you than I have."

"No," said Sam, "I don't reckon I have, Jeff. We're full brothers. I reckon you've just got more head on you. I see kinda what you mean, now, but I don't reckon I ever would have if this hadn't happened." Then he looked at Jeff and said anxiously, "Jeff, you reckon you'll be able to ride in the Run?"

His concern was a little overdone. Jeff grinned.

"Sam, I believe you'd be willing to see me get my head shot half off if you thought it would give you a chance to ride the mare in the Run."

"Well, you did get a dirty lick, Jeff," Sam said sheepishly. "You'll have to be careful with that head."

"I'll be all right in a day or so, Sam. Just a lick on the head was all it amounts to."

It was near sundown when they hit the big encampment encircling Caldwell. Sam stared with disbelieving eyes.

"All these people out for land?" he blurted.

"Most of them, at least."

Sam spoke in an awed voice. "Jeff we ain't got a chance!"

"I wouldn't say that," replied Jeff, as they rolled into Caldwell.

People stopped to watch the mare following the wagon. Sam grinned.

"Look at her dance and show off!" he said.

Jeff nodded. "She knows when people are looking at her. Just like a woman."

South of town they were obliged to drive some distance before they could find an open camping spot. And close by the spot where they did stop was an ancient wagon which looked as if it had crossed the plains in 'Forty-nine. A family was getting supper around a campfire and a gaunt, bewhiskered man was feeding a road-weary team and an extra horse, behind the wagon.

On this wagon's weathered side was chalked the inscription:

MALARIAD IN ARKANSAW, BALD-NOBBED IN MISSOURY, CYCLONED IN NEBRASKY, PROHIBITED IN KANSAS—OKLAHOMY OR BUST!

Jeff called Sam's attention to the inscription.

"There, Sam," he said, "is something. I've read whole books of history that told me less. You remember it."

[*Turn page*]

JEFF and Sam were eating supper when this same gaunt giant came over to their wagon. The yellow tinge of too long a stay in the swampland was stamped on his be-whiskered face, and his patched blue-jeans were stuffed into the tops of tall cowhide boots. A great toe had burst the confines of one of these. His eyes were bright and amiable.

"Hiya, neighbors," he said affably. "Where ye from and what's yore handle?"

"Dorey," said Jeff. "That's my brother, Sam. I'm Jeff. We're from Kentucky."

"Kentucky!" exclaimed the giant. "Why, boy, I used to know some Doreys back in Kentucky before I left there. Any relation to Judge Dorey?"

"We don't claim no relation to that old devil," Sam said sourly, "He wanted to put me in a home."

"The Judge is our uncle," Jeff said.

"Well, shake hands! My name is Sowre—Deck Sowre. Reckon I left Kentucky before that boy there was borned. You ain't," he said hopefully, "got a jug of that good old Kentucky corn in your waggin, have you?"

"Sam, get the gentleman the jug," Jeff directed.

With none too good grace Sam produced the jug and Deck Sowre took it almost reverently. He sampled the contents, nodded, and held up a long forefinger. Then cradling the jug in the crook of his arm, he tipped back his head and his prominent Adam's apple made a veritable race track out of his long neck.

He lowered the jug. "Boys," he said huskily, "that was worth waiting ten years for. Anything I can do for you, name it."

Over at his wagon a thin woman cupped her hands and called shrilly:

"Deck! Decker Sowre! It you want any vittles, you better git to gittin' over here!"

Deck Sowre winked comically. "That," he said, quite unnecessarily, "is my ole woman. See you later, boys."

After he had gone Sam grumbled, "Old wind-bag. Few trips and we might as well throw that jug away—empty."

"Sam, you're wrong. Deck is no windbag. On the contrary, he's been around and I expect he can tell us where to look for a good piece of land in Oklahoma. And how to get there by the shortest route."

"Just a big wind-bag," reasserted Sam. "He'll be back, long as there's anything in that jug."

"Even if he drinks it all," replied Jeff, "I think we will be well repaid."

CHAPTER V
Boomer

DECK SOWRE was back, shortly before dusk.

"Anything left in that jug, boys?" was his first question."

"Get the gentleman the jug, Sam," Jeff said.

Sam did, but again reluctantly.

Deck Sowre took another long pull, sighed and handed the jug back to Sam.

"Thanky, bud," he said. Then he gave the mare a long look. "Peart lookin' mare you got there, Jeff. Fast?"

"Fairly fast," admitted Jeff.

"No faster ever come out of the Blue-grass!" Sam exclaimed.

Deck nodded. "Believe it," he said, then he squatted down and began drawing lines on the ground with a stick. "Ever been in Oklahomy, Jeff?"

"Never have."

"Well, sir, I'm going to tell you boys something. You may have the fastest mare in the Run, but she won't get you nowhere unless you know the ropes. You could run her tongue out and wind up findin' a low-down bunch of Sooners on the land you aimed for."

"We sort of figured you could put us on to something, Deck," Jeff replied.

"You figured right. I know Oklahomy as well as *that*." Deck held out a great palm.

"Were you a Boomer, Deck?"

"Yes sir, a Boomer, and proud of it. I've been run out of Oklahomy more times than a Walker hound has got fleas. We started goin' in there more than ten year ago. Then cattlemen tried to run us out with their tough cowhands. They couldn't cut her, so they sicked the troops on us."

"Troops!" said Jeff. "How could they do that?"

"Politics, dirty politics, Jeff. They run us out and back we bounced. They run us out agin, and back we come, stronger than ever. I've been led by the neck with a rope tied to the end gate of a wagon many a mile with a Johnnie-bluecoat ridin' right on my tail. I had to walk or drag. I fought for my country

in the Rebellion, but that happened right here in these United States of Americy. You won't ever find it in the history books, but it happened sure enough, and us with the law on our side."

Sam grinned at Jeff and old Deck, beginning to feel the effects of the powerful liquor went on:

"You don't know what us old Boomers went through to open Oklahomy, but we hung and rattled until we cracked her. We made the big-bugs up in Washington set up and take notice of us. Cattlemen even let us put out crops, then they put the troops on us, run us out and fattened their cattle on our crops. Laughed and bragged about it. They ain't laughing now, are they, Jeff?"

Jeff thought of young Bob McAllister—dead. "No, Deck. They're not laughing now."

Deck put his attention on the lines he had drawn on the ground.

"When the Jump-off comes, you take this here line right here. It's a part of the old Reno Trail. Further down it's the old Chisholm Trail—feller by that name used to drive cattle up from Texas over that trail—cross the Big Canadian right here, and foller the old Chisholm trail across to the Little Canadian to the old Chisholm crossing right here. Cross and drive your stake right here, and you'll not only have the best piece of land in Oklahomy, but a set of buildings as well."

"Buildings!" exclaimed Sam who had listened, open-mouthed.

"I wouldn't fool you boys. I know what I'm talkin' about. That's the old Circle S Ranch lease. Cattleman put them buildings up. Had a long lease on that ground. Thought he was fixed for life. Set the troops on us. Who's laughin' now?"

"Deck," said Jeff, "why don't you try for that land and buildings?"

"Aim too," replied Deck. "Lots of other old Boomers aim to, too."

"There can't be buildings enough for all of us, Deck."

Deck Sowre grinned. "You got a head, Jeff. I can see that. You're wonderin' why I told you about it, ain't you?"

"I am," Jeff admitted.

"I could say I like you and tell the truth, but that ain't the real reason, Jeff. Lot of the tough cowhands have gone bad. They know all this country, and they know they can slip in and Sooner a good piece of land, sell it quick for a good stake and get out."

JEFF shook his head, a little bewildered.

"I still don't understand," he confessed.

"How fast *is* that mare—fast enough to beat any cow horse in there from the Jump-off?"

"Yes," Jeff said. "I know she can do that."

"Well, Jeff, it's going to be durned hard to prove a Sooner *is* a Sooner. You can see that, can't you?"

"I can see that, Deck."

"I figure that mare of yours can tell."

Jeff smiled. "Deck, she can do a lot of things, but she can't talk."

"In this case I think she can, cause if there is anybody ahead of you at the Circle S, we'll know they're Sooners, and we'll know how to handle the skunks."

"Deck," said Jeff, "you're not so dumb, yourself. Any cow horse that beats me in there can be safely considered a Sooner. Now, how long do we stay here?"

Deck Sowre arose and stretched. "Move-up has already been announced. Start in the mornin'." He looked toward the wagon. "Reckon there's anything left in that—"

He didn't have time to complete the sentence. Sam was in the wagon in an instant and handing out the jug.

"Help yourself, Mr. Sowre," he said.

Deck drank and handed the jug back.

'Well, boys, better be gettin' back to the waggin. Got to git up early to check over things before that bugle blows."

He went toward his wagon on decidedly unsteady legs.

"That old road-runner did know something!" Sam exclaimed. "Jeff, if we can get a set of buildings with our land, we'll be all set! What did he mean about Move-up?"

"The land to be opened," Jeff explained, "is down in the dead center of the Territory. Good many miles from here to the north boundary. People have to have time to get to the boundary, where the Jump-off will start."

Sam crawled under the wagon and began to spread their blankets. Off to their right a group struck up a song. Group after group took it up and the cadence ran up to and beyond Caldwell, the refrain coming back like a vast echo. Jeff had heard the old song a thousand times back home in Kentucky and so had Sam. It was, "One More River to Cross."

"Feel a durn safer here than where we was last night," Sam said soberly. "Don't you, Jeff."

"Yes," said Jeff, but noticed that Sam had

turned in cuddling the Old Baker.

Jeff did not sleep at once. There were so many things to think about. These people had crossed a good many rivers and the old song was surely prophetic. They were coming at last into their own. But on the other side was Bob McAllister who had certainly crossed his last river.

"Jeff," Sam said sleepily, you reckon that old sheriff will ever come up with them fellers?"

"I expect he will, Sam."

It comforted him to know that, at last, Sam was thinking for himself. Even if they failed in the Run it would be worth a lot to get Sam started right . . . .

THE camp was alive early next morning. People everywhere were checking wagons, harness and other equipment to guard against break-downs. Everybody knew that whoever was not on the line when the cannon was fired would be out of luck.

Shortly before the advance bugle blew Sheriff McAllister rode up, He motioned Jeff aside and talked from the saddle.

"You making the ride too, Sheriff?" Jeff asked.

"I'm riding," said the sheriff, "but not for land."

"Think they might be in this crowd?"

"No. I *know* they're not in this crowd." His old eyes remained fixed on the distance for a time. "I just wanted to sort of explain things to you—about Bob."

"We have our troubles in Kentucky too, Sheriff," Jeff said quickly. "The main reason I came out here was not for the Run, but to get my kid brother away from some things that could be—"

The sheriff nodded. "Bob was bitter. He got running with the wrong crowd. Them four didn't go bad—they was borned bad. But Bob was man enough to draw the line. They wanted to Sooner a piece of land and sell it for a stake. It happened to be the old lease of Bob's boss and he knew somebody else was figuring on making the ride for a part of it. So he told them no. They killed him. I thought you would like to know how it was."

The sheriff then rode on and soon after that the advance bugle blew.

Sam, who had watched the talk, said with a subdued excitement:

"He's on the hunt for them, ain't he, Jeff?"

"You don't have to hunt for anything that isn't lost, Sam," Jeff said soberly.

"You think he knows where they're hid out?"

"I'm sure he does."

"I sure wouldn't like to be in their shoes," Sam said forebodingly.

The camp moved. Looking back from a vantage point Jeff could see the long line extending to and through Caldwell, with late arrivals whipping up with might and main to avoid being left. He was feeling stronger today, and his head ached but little.

"Think you can make the Run, Jeff?" Sam asked.

Jeff smiled. "I think I can, Sam."

"Durn it!" Sam said.

CHAPTER VI

Move-up Day

RIDERS, both men and women, began to drift by, seeking the cleaner air of the front as dust arose in stifling clouds. Jeff saw a girl on a sorrel flit by, riding light as a bird.

"That looked like the mare Bob McAllister was riding when he got shot!" Sam exclaimed.

"It was," replied Jeff, but he didn't tell Sam that the girl riding the sorrel was a girl he had met in the bar of the hotel—and remembered.

For mid-April the day was murderously hot, and the soldiers escorting the land seekers set a stiff pace. Thin and overburdened teams began to fail. Wagons dropped out and the entire line stretched enormously.

The Doreys' tall Kentucky mules, well-fed and expertly handled by Sam, began to move up. By noon their light-running Studebaker was at the head of the wagon line.

Only riders and the escorting troopers were ahead. The blue uniforms lent a splash of color to the van, and Jeff saw the girl on the sorrel again, riding beside an officer.

"There's that sorrel again, Jeff," Sam said. "Looks like she might be purty fast, too."

Jeff said nothing.

At the noon halt, Deck Sowre came up to their wagon.

"Old captain knows he's cut it too durned fine, now," he complained, not even thinking to inquire as to the contents of the jug.

"Should have started move-up day or two ago. Lot of these teams are too pore and weak to stand this gait."

"It's possible," said Jeff, "that he had his orders, Deck."

Deck could see no good in troopers of any sort.

"Yeah," he agreed dourly, "from some whippersnapper that never done nothin' but polish a chair with the seat of his britches, a good thousand mile from here."

He went back to his wagon and the march was resumed. Eventually they came to the banks of the Salt.

There was an ominous bank of clouds back in the Sand Hills region and although the vanguard reached the river long before night, stragglers were still coming in when the sun sank behind those boiling clouds.

Deck Sowre came to the Dorey wagon. There was no humor about the old Boomer now. He was deadly serious.

"Jeff," he said directly, "we got to make this crossing tonight. Tomorrow noon is Jump-off, and if we have a regular toad-strangler of a rain tonight, morning will find us setting on the wrong side of a river that can't be crossed."

Jeff nodded. "We'd better cross tonight."

"That hard-headed captain says no. I tried to reason with him, but whoever seen a durned bluecoat with any reason? But we've fought 'em before and we can agin if we have to. Let's get organized and get the crossing started before that storm hits. If them soldiers try to stop us, we'll fight 'em. After all we've gone through we won't stand for losing out on this Run."

"Deck," said Jeff, "before we try anything, let me have a talk with the captain."

"Waste of time," declared Deck. "Go ahead, but make it fast. I'll wait here at the waggin."

Jeff found the escort tents pitched down at the water's edge, guarding the ford. The captain was both young and stiff-necked. He took both his responsibility and his authority seriously.

"Captain," Jeff said, "these people think it is advisable to make the crossing tonight."

"Out of the question!" snapped the officer. "This is a mean crossing even at daylight. I had hoped to cross today, but the line couldn't hold up, and since I'm responsible for the lives of these people I won't even consider a night crossing."

"Captain, we can build fires on either side, stretch a rope to mark the lower side of the ford and cross at night, even during a storm."

"You're wasting your breath. I will not consider a night crossing."

"Captain, you've only got a company of men. Do you think they could stop these people if they decided to cross?"

THE officer's lip curled.

"I wouldn't recommend that they try it!" he said shortly.

"If that storm back there hits us, they *will* try it, Captain. You couldn't stop them with a thousand men. A lot of them may drown. Why not face the issue squarely, and get ready now? You say you're responsible for their safety, but by refusing to let them cross now you're actually jeopardizing it. They wont stand for missing out on this Run now. Get the fires built, and a line of wagons across the ford before the storm hits, and they will cross. Most of these people have crossed a thousand worse rivers than this and they're river wise."

The officer studied him a moment. "You talk like a blasted lawyer," he said drily.

Jeff smiled. "I'm working on it, Captain."

When the captain smiled. Jeff knew he had won.

"Pass the word to get the fire started on this side," ordered the officer. "Have them pick a good team to take a bunch across to start another fire on the other side."

"Thank you, Captain," Jeff said, and walked away.

At the wagon Jeff found Deck Sowre and Sam engaged in talk, Deck with the now empty jug in his hand. Jeff told the old Boomer that the captain had agreed to the crossing.

"Jeff, you've missed your calling—you ought to have studied law," Deck exclaimed, and off he went to spread the word.

The camp sprang into activity. Axes rang and soon a great fire was roaring on the bank, lighting the river halfway across. Then Deck Sowre again approached Jeff with an apologetic manner.

"We hate to work a good horse to death," he said, "but the truth is we need them big mules of yours and that light Studebaker to take the bunch across to start the fire over there. Can we have 'em?"

"Of course," replied Jeff. "But you'd better let Sam handle the reins. They're mules, you know, and they're used to Sam. He's a top driver. I'll feel out the ford on my mare."

"That is Kentucky talkin'!" exclaimed Deck.

By the time the Studebaker was ready it was full dark and lightning flashes were sheeting the horizon, thunder rumbling in the distance. Old Deck was in a lather for fear the captain would change his mind and call the crossing off.

"Jeff," he said earnestly," whatever you do, don't miss that ford! We got to get this line across before that storm hits us!"

Jeff mounted the mare and paused beside Sam on the wagon seat.

"Keep a rod or two behind me, Sam," he directed. "If I should happen to get off the ford, stop and wait until I get back. We can't fail on this one."

"Give that mare her head." Sam said laconically. "She can feel out any crossing."

Jeff rode into the river and Sam followed him at the prescribed distance. The light from the fire did not reach much more than half the distance across the river and as soon as Jeff found himself out of it's radius he had nothing to guide him save the occasional glimpses of the far bank when lightning flashed.

It was a ticklish business, like riding into a dark void, and he realized that Sam's advice was sound. The mare would have to feel out the last half of the distance, so he let the reins hang lax. Behind him came the mules, the lines taut and steady in Sam's sure hands, but after they left the circle of firelight, Sam closed the gap. He had to, to keep Jeff in sight.

Jeff felt the water rise to his calves, his knees, and boil about the mare's barrel. He felt her angle shrewdly to counteract its thrust and forge on, knowing now that if she lost the ford, the mules would follow her off the ford. And if that happened Jeff knew that the night crossing would most certainly be called off.

The mare did not lose the ford. Jeff felt the water lower, then by a lightning flash saw the bank before him. Out the mare scrambled, followed closely by the mules.

AXES in hand, men were leaping from the wagon even before it shored. A rope which had been played out as the wagon crossed was tightened and secured. Flames from the fire beat back the night.

Jeff saw the first wagon on the opposite side start, and he knew it was going to be a race between it and the storm. Lightning was now ripping the heavens apart and thunder was shaking the earth.

Slowly, so slowly the wagon came on, drawing after it the long line of others. It shored and the line was complete just as the storm whooped down on the crossing.

Rain came down in hissing, blinding sheets, lightning was so vivid it left both man and beast blind, and riding over it was the vast and unceasing cannonade of the thunder.

Jeff knew it was too late for the captain to call off the crossing now. Now it was solely a race against time. He dismounted and went down to the water's edge, set a stake and watched it for fifteen minutes while the wagons rolled up the bank in a never ceasing line. In fifteen minutes the river rose four inches.

There was no need to press the drivers. They were river-wise, most of them, and they were slamming teams across as fast as wagon stock could be lashed. Riders, too, were coming, sheeted forms in the lashing rain. They were passing wagons, spurring hard.

Jeff saw one such attempt to pass a huge and lumbering wagon on the wrong, the lower side. The wagon swerved and this rider was crowded into the guide rope. The horse became entangled in the rope, panicked, and went down over it, fighting furiously.

From mid-river someone shouted, "That horse has got a foot caught in a rein!"

Jeff rushed up the bank and leaped on the mare's back. He headed her for the river and let her feel a touch of the spur. She left the steep bank below the ford with a soaring leap, struck swimming. and went completely under. And she came up swimming like a great, sleek otter.

They were quickly out of the circle of firelight and he would never have located the panicked animal had it not been for the lightning. But he saw the animal, still fighting wildly, part of the time up and part of the time under, the rider still in saddle.

His mare brought him alongside and risking a disabling blow from the drowning animal's threshing hoofs. he leaned far over and felt for the reins. He found them, taut as iron, and knew that one forefoot was hooked over them and that they were looped over the saddle-horn with such tension that the rider could not release them.

He set himself and gave a powerful tug. Under the additional pressure the strap broke and instantly the horse began to swim

naturally. He pulled the unbroken rein up and, using his mare as a tow, made for the bank. But he could tell that she was tiring when she made it. He was obliged literally to drag the rescued animal up the steep bank.

CHAPTER VII
The Fateful Cannon

THE first wild fury of the storm had passed. But rain still fell and thunder still rolled. Lightning still sheeted, and it was by this light that Jeff Dorey saw he had rescued a girl—the girl he had found serving bar in the hotel Sample Room.

"You've changed jobs, haven't you?" he said.

Her voice came out of the darkness with a startled note. "Who are you? Where have you ever seen me before?"

"Waiting bar in a Caldwell hotel," he replied.

"I remember!" she exclaimed. "You're Jeff Dorey, from Kentucky. How did you know about Bob?"

"I saw it happen," he said soberly.

"Do you know who killed Bob?"

"I know," he replied simply. Then he added, "Bob must have meant a great deal to you."

She did not reply at once, and the thunder went rumbling down the river. By a lightning flash he saw her face, white, strained.

"Bob was nice to me," she said. "He seemed to understand that a girl could wait on tables in a Sample Room and still be respectable. Especially when there was nothing else she could do."

"I imagine he was like that," he said. "Did you come from Kentucky?"

"My folks come from Indiana, but I know how Kentuckians talk. My folks got run out of Oklahoma and went back home. I stayed."

"What is your name," he asked.

"Enid Summers."

"How do you happen to be riding Bob McAllister's horse?"

"Is it any of your business?" she asked shortly.

"None whatever."

Her voice softened. "Bob intended to ride this horse in the Run. His father, the sheriff, gave her to me, after Bob was killed, and I'm going to try for the same land that Bob had picked out."

"I've got my piece picked out too," Jeff said, with a laugh. "Maybe we'd better check up to avoid interference."

"It's the old lease that Bob used to ride for, the Circle S, down on the Little Canadian," Enid said.

"The Circle S!" he exclaimed, then to cover his surprise, said, "We'd better get up to the ford."

"I haven't thanked you for pulling me out," she said gravely. "Little as my life may be worth, I'd hate to lose it."

"Most of us would," he agreed gravely. . . .

A smiling sun rose on a river gone mad. Deck Sowre appeared, his face wreathed with smiles.

"Jeff," he said, "we owe you a medal or something. That was nip and tuck. Look at that old river now!"

"I can't claim any credit, Deck," Jeff said quietly.

"You get it, just the same," replied Deck. "Now before we start on this last two-hour march, let's get everything straight. You got that location fixed in your mind?"

Jeff hesitated. "Deck, I've decided not to try for that particular piece of land."

Deck's jaw fell. "Why?" he blurted.

"Little too much competition, I'm afraid," Jeff said evasively.

"Jeff," Deck said earnesty, "don't do this to us! We need you and that mare bad. We got to know what's what. We don't ask you to fight whoever may happen to be in there—just mark 'em. We'll take care of them when we get in, and you'll get first pick of that land. Don't throw out on us, Jeff."

Jeff remained firm, and in the end Deck gave him up. "You ain't the kind of feller I though you was," Deck said, and stalked away.

Sam had listened to the argument.

"Jeff let *me* ride the mare," he said eagerly. "I'm not afraid of any durned old Sooners!"

"Sam, do you think I'm *afraid*?"

"It looks like it!" blurted Sam.

SOON after, the advance bugle blew and the last leg of the memorable march began. It was fittingly difficult. Wagons mired in the soft ground. Single-trees popped and weakened teams seesawed futilely, some lying down and quitting.

Drivers abandoned such teams, jumped on a lead horse reserved for the Run, and

pushed on, leaving their families to bring up the wagons when the ground dried.

The Doreys' light Studebaker, drawn by the powerful mules, was the first wagon to wheel into position at the Line. There, blue-coated troopers, who had been on duty for weeks, held the line. East and west as far as the eye could reach it stretched, and the tension, already high, mounted. The soldiers had difficulty in holding the people back.

"We might as well stayed in Kentucky!" Sam said miserably. "Wish we had!"

Jeff had had time to think things over.

"Sam," he said, "I've decided to go ahead and make the ride. But don't count on a set of buildings."

"Why? Deck said we'd get first choice if you was first in."

"Don't count on them. But tell Deck I've decided to make the ride."

Sam hustled off to find Deck Sowre, not a small task in the ever-growing mass of people. Jeff soberly began to prepare the mare for the Run. He stripped down to the barest essentials, knowing that in a long run such as this, every pound would count. But he did include several pounds of dead weight on which he had not figured—the heavy old Army pistol.

"Sam, I'm making this ride against every conviction I ever had," he said, when Sam came back. "I want you to promise me that whatever happens, you wont make it a personal affair."

"I don't know what you're driving at, Jeff."

"I'll explain it to you. This land is the old Circle S—you heard Deck tell me that. Now that's the ranch that Bob McAllister used to ride for. I think those other four rode for the same outfit. Bob McAllister was killed because he wouldn't agree to go in with them to Sooner that land. Does that mean anything to you?"

Sam was an intelligent boy. "You mean," he said, "you think the Sooners you'll find there will be them four devils?"

"Those four and nobody knows how many others that have gone wild. I'm as certain of it as I am of anything."

"Why not tell them soldiers?" Sam suggested.

Jeff shook his head. "They have their orders, and they've got their hands full holding this line. Most of them have been on duty for weeks, and their horses are in no shape to make such a run in time. The cannon will go off in a few minutes."

"Jeff," Sam said swiftly, "I didn't mean to call you a coward. I—I was just mad. Let it go! We can surely get something."

Jeff shook his head. "I've got other reasons for making the ride, Sam, and I'll make it if you will promise what I asked."

"I promise, Jeff," said Sam humbly, and disappeared.

He did not return at once, and Jeff was obliged to take his place in the line without giving his brother parting instructions.

A bugle's note cut the air and the long line became rigid, poised. A mounted officer, facing the line, took out his watch and held his disengaged hand high.

He counted the seconds.

"Fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . ."

His uplifted hand whipped down, and in the distance the fateful cannon roared!

The ensuing rush was a stupendous, staggering thing. People on horses, mules, in wagons, carts, buggies, every conveyance known, broke and went storming southward.

Starting sensibly, Jeff saw some bizarre and amusing, not to say tragic, things. Close beside him a lumbering high-wheeled wagon leaped and bounced. In the seat a woman in long skirts held with both hands to the seat. On the footboard stood her man, lashing the plunging team to wilder efforts.

A MAN in black broadcloth and gleaming white shirt lanced by on a race horse. He was immaculate, cool, amused. Over there a lumbering ox team, heads down, tongues out, tails up, shook the earth with their tremendous galloping. A man on a high-wheeled velocipede came to grief before he had traveled two rods. A girl on a sorrel horse, riding light and easy skimmed by. Jeff saw the quick glance she gave him, and he saluted her with a wave of his hand. It was Enid Summers.

He gave the mare plenty of time to warm up, and when she was well warmed she began to move. The press thinned out and fell behind, and then they were out in front with the mare racing southward as sweet and true as a perfect machine. Only the sorrel remained in front and out of sight.

Following the route that Deck Sowre had mapped for him, Jeff crossed first the Big Canadian, and went up the stiff climb on the south side with the mare pulled to a walk. He knew that Enid Summers would not necessarily follow the same route as himself,

but he also knew that the two would eventually meet at an intersection. Certainly at the crossing of the Little Canadian, if not sooner.

When their routes did intersect he intended to pull up with Enid and warn her what to expect at the old Circle S. He wanted to disclaim any intention of trying to beat her out of what, he felt, she should have. He hoped her sorrel would be fast enough to take her in ahead of the rush. Deck Sowre might not feel the same benevolence as himself, toward her.

Crossing the wide expanse of ground between the two Canadians the mare began to chafe against the moderate restraint he put on her. Usually a most tractable animal, her behavior puzzled Jeff until he caught a glimpse of the sorrel ahead, disappearing over a raise.

Then he understood the mare's impatience. She had known for some time that the sorrel was ahead, and she didn't like it. Under lessened restraint, she sprang forward.

CHAPTER VIII

The Race

QUICKLY Jeff closed the gap and Enid Summers, looking back, saw him. He saw something akin to dismay, coupled with resentment, in the girl's face, then she was about in the saddle and the sorrel really began to move. Not until then did Jeff suspect that he had a job ahead of him.

The sorrel was both fast and game. She was ridden by a girl many pounds lighter than Jeff, and one who knew how to get the utmost out of her mount. Twice Jeff tried to shout an appeal for her to hold up, but if she heard, the girl gave no sign. If anything, she rode more determinedly.

They swept across the wide stretch of land between the two rivers, skirting plum thickets, leaping gullies, sliding down drifts. Jeff's mare became a creamy white with lather, and he began to wonder if he would have to break her wind to run down this stubbornly tenacious girl. Her horse, he imagined, meant nothing to her. She would willingly ruin the sorrel to beat him in.

He saw the sorrel's hindquarters flourish in the air as the animal dipped over into a descent. When the mare topped the descent he saw, below, the winding ribbon of the Little Canadian and a cluster of buildings which must be the old Circle S. He had to take the sorrel before crossing the river!

The sorrel was still going, but Jeff could see that the game animal was almost done. She was laboring, being carried onward mostly now by momentum. She might fall at any moment.

Evidently Enid Summers knew it, too, for he saw her shake her feet loose from the stirrups and shoot a quick look back. There was desperation, almost hatred there, and he knew she thought he had tricked her into revealing her destination.

Her horse hit the flat ground giving to the ford and almost came down. Straightened up, held by the girl's sure hand, the sorrel dropped over the steep bank to the ford. Jeff's mare closed with a sudden, fierce rush.

The sorrel never reached the ford. Halfway down the bank she seemed just to fold her forelegs and dive. The girl was thrown

[*Turn page*]

high, struck the ground at the water's edge, and lay still.

With all four feet set the mare plowed down the bank and stopped, almost straddling the sorrel. Jeff leaped off and ran to the water's edge, pulled the girl back from the water. After a quick examination, he decided she was only stunned. She had taken the spill like a skilled rider.

He was dipping water with his hat when he heard his mare snort, then the driving rush of her hoofs. Caught entirely by surprise he had barely time to leap aside before his mare, savagely spurred, rushed past and hit the water a tremendous strike.

The mare almost went down, recovered, and feeling those punishing spurs, went lunging across the ford, hurling spray high.

"Enid!" Jeff shouted. "Stop! Stop, I tell you!"

She didn't stop and in a fury of desperation he wrenched out his pistol and levelled down for a disabling shot, not at Enid Summers, but at his beloved mare. But he lowered the pistol unfired. He couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it.

The sorrel had come to her feet, but Jeff knew she was done. She could never cross the ford, bearing his weight. He crossed afoot, and went upriver at a run.

Rounding a sharp bend in the river he came suddenly upon the Circle S buildings. Over the deserted corrals he could see the top of the ranchhouse. Nobody was in sight.

He rounded the corrals and saw before the ranchhouse his own lathered, panting mare and five other horses, all saddled. The front door of the ranchhouse yawned open and as he moved quietly toward the house, gun in hand, he knew that this was it. All his fine dreams for a clean start in Oklahoma were nothing but that—dreams.

AS HE stepped softly up on the porch he was struck by the unearthly quiet of the house. Within, no one spoke or moved.

He reached the door and when his look reached the interior of that big room he saw Enid Summers standing just inside the doorway, motionless as a graven image. He could not see her face but her small ears, half covered by her disheveled hair, were as colorless as those of the dead.

His step brought him past her and she never stirred. Then he saw what it was.

Four men, no, five. Four lay on one side of the room and one on the opposite. The four were the same four that had ridden up to his wagon that beautiful moonlight night seemingly so long ago, and the fifth, lying alone, was the sheriff.

Jeff said in a clear voice, "Thank you, Sheriff," and, turning, he caught Enid Summers by the arm and led her outside. She looked at him with those hunted eyes.

"Why did you say that?" she asked.

"I don't know, he replied. "I just felt like saying it."

"Did you know *they* would be here—and the sheriff?"

"Not the sheriff," he told her. "But I knew the others would be here."

"Is that why—was that the reason—"

He nodded and she turned away.

Then the rush hit the place. Deck Sowre, riding a gaunt buckskin, flung off before the ranchhouse. Jeff moved to meet him.

"Where are they?" he exclaimed. "Where are the skunks, Jeff?"

"In the house, Deck," Jeff said queerly, "but they won't cause anybody any more trouble—ever."

Deck's eyes went to the big pistol Jeff still held in his hand.

"Jeff, I never forgot that you come from Kentucky. But you needn't have hogged the whole shootin' match."

Jeff stopped him with a motion of his hand. "This gun, Deck, has not fired a shot since I left Kentucky. I hope it never will have to fire one, in anger. The law has already come to Oklahoma."

Deck nodded, not grasping what Jeff was trying to tell him.

"You staked out yet? Well, get it drove, Jeff, before the rest of the gang gets here. You rate first choice."

"No, Jeff. That girl there beat me in here."

"Don't believe it!" retorted Deck.

"Ask her."

Deck strode up to Enid Summers and spoke to her briefly. He drew a reply, then turned. "Hey, Jeff!" he called. "She says your *mare* was first in. Now who in thunder am I to believe?"

Neither said anything, but Enid Summers stole a quick look at Jeff, and Deck Sowre suddenly grinned.

"Tell you what," he said genially, "why not stake out a joint claim?"

Color hit Enid's face and Jeff said, "Deck, have you staked out yet?"

"Thunder, no!" exclaimed Deck, and forthwith departed.

Sally saw the man leap from the cliff to the top of the coach

Skeleton Trail

By TOM PARSONS

When a stagecoach is held up and a pretty girl threatened by an eerie highwayman, Jim Burnett decides to take a hand!

IT WAS Sally Janson's first night stage ride and it was a thrilling experience. The big Concord, rocking on its leather springs, rolled down the road and plunged into a dark and gloomy canyon where the rocky walls threw back the thunder of the horses' hoofs and the grind of steel tires.

Leaning out the open window, she watched the walls flash by and smiled to herself as she thought of the comments when she had introduced herself to Jim Burnett, the young stage driver and old Ike Adams, his shotgun guard.

"Sally Janson!" old Ike had gasped, nearly swallowing his eating tobacco. "Shucks, I'd never believe it! Why, you've growed, gal!"

"That's usual, isn't it?" Sally had laughed.

"And purty!" old Ike marveled. " 'Scuse my sayin' so, Sally, but I reckon you don't take much after Sam Janson. He'd have made a mud fence look right handsome."

Jim Burnett had said nothing, but his eyes had showed admiration. Only as he helped the girl inside, he said low-voiced:

"Don't be nervous if you get a fast ride tonight, Miss Sally. We've got a shipment of gold from the Ten Strike mine aboard, and I'm a mite nervous about it."

"Pour leather to them, Jim," the girl said smiling. "Just because I've been away doesn't mean I'm a tenderfoot."

She was thinking of that now as the stage rumbled through the rocky pass. And with the thought came the sudden blast of a Winchester from the driver's seat. Sally leaned far out to see what was ahead. And what she saw was so incredible, so shocking that in spite of herself, a scream of fright was wrenched from her throat.

A human skeleton stood in the middle of

the road, one bony arm upraised to stop the stage!

Even as she saw it, old Ike's rifle roared again. The skeleton jerked as though hit, but remained in its gruesome position. The horses decided they wanted no part of this and tried to run through and away from the horrible white object in the road.

As they bolted, a gun roared from somewhere. Old Ike gasped, dropped his Winchester and crumpled in his seat. The stage roared through and past the skeleton. Then Jim Burnett cried out as his sombrero flew from his head and he clapped both hands to his forehead. He reeled drunkenly for a moment atop the swaying stage and then, to the girl's horror, pitched over the side and was gone!

SHE was alone in a runway coach. But not for long. To her surprise, the springs creaked and lurched to a sudden weight. A big man swung up to the driver's seat and gripped the reins. In his powerful hands the horses felt mastery and they gradually slowed and came to a halt. The big man swung down and approached the door, gun in fist.

"Come out of there!" he ordered.

Sally stepped out.

"Jest a gal, eh? Wal, I'll leave you and the old codger somewhere's after I get the gold out of the boot. He ain't hit bad."

"What is this—a hold-up?" Sally gasped.

"You guessed it, ma'am. Slickest piece of work you ever see too, single-handed. I'm powerful proud of myself. Get back in there."

Since there was nothing else to do, she got back into the coach. It started rolling again and presently began to climb the switchbacks and hairpin turns of the cliff to the top. Her heart like lead, Sally stared at the walls through the windows and wondered about old Ike and Jim Burnett. Ike, the bandit had said, was not badly wounded. But Burnett? It looked as though he had been shot in the head.

The top of the cliff was near and the driver was urging the horses on with voice and whip. Looking out, she could see the edge and the lighter sky above it. And suddenly, there was a man silhouetted on the cliff top!

Only for a second, she saw him. Then he leaped off the edge, straight down on top of the coach as it passed under him. Sally heard and felt the thump of his landing. There was a startled curse from the bandit and the short, sharp scuffle of a fight. The coach meanwhile creaked up on the flat and the horses stopped by themselves for a breather.

The victor of the fight above, dropped off and the door on Sally's right opened. Jim Burnett, face bloody, stood there panting for breath.

"Jim! Oh, thank heaven! How did you get here?"

Even as she asked, Sally was busy, digging into her bag for a spare petticoat to be ripped into bandages.

"Came straight up the cliff," Jim panted. "Knew I could beat him up here with all the switchbacks he had to make."

"Old Ike?"

"He's not too bad. We'll get him to a doctor. And the bandit has only a lump on his head from my Colt."

Sally approached him with a bandage. "Where are you shot?"

"Shot? I'm not shot, Miss Sally. Know what that hombre did? He stretched a wire across the road and hung the skeleton from it. That's why the skeleton didn't fall when Ike shot it. But when we went under that wire it like to scalped me. Reckon I lost a mite of skin and hair, but my sombrero kept it from bein' worse."

With the bandage on his head he looked like a wild and disheveled Arab.

"Now, Miss Sally, if you'll get back into your chariot, I'll deliver you to your uncle, the gold to the depot, old Ike to the doctor, the bandit to jail—and me—after this I reckon I'll go to bed!"

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE WATER IS MINE

A Dramatic Novelet of the Rangeland

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

A Helping Gun

By TOM CURRY

A flaming gun showdown is in the offing when Jimmy Farling sides a struggling farmer against a crooked range manager!

A STAIN of smoke in the clear west Texas sky drew Jimmy Farling's keen blue eyes.

"Who's runnin' a fire at Kling's old shack?" he murmured to Pedro, his chestnut gelding. "Lawson will have fits if another farmer's there."

The NI was a cattle outfit but they used enough mustangs to keep Farling busy. He loved horses, loved working with them. Old Man Naylor Ince, owner of the spread, spent most of his time on his huge ranch in the Big Bend country. The NI was only a side show and was run by a manager, Ed Lawson.

"Go on, get goin'!" ordered Farling harshly

Farling had strong limbs and a lean, healthy aspect. He wore leather, and a curved Stetson canted on his dark-haired head. He had been working on a blind to trap a bunch of wild horses and was on his way back to the ranch. But to check up on the smoke he turned down a steep slope and reached the beaten trail, a back route that led from the NI country through the mountains and thence to New Mexico.

The smoke came from Kling's weather-beaten shack. It rose from a cookfire where two women were busy. In the yard stood a large red wagon and several pieces of furniture which had been unloaded from it along with boxes and bales of supplies.

As Farling rounded the square barn and took this in at a glance, the women saw him. They seemed startled and he heard one say, "Why, it's a cowboy!" She was middle-aged and stoutish.

The second was a slim girl whose hair rivaled the sunlight. For a time she returned Farling's steady look, and the color came into her rounded cheeks.

"Oh, Dad!" she sang out.

A heavy man of around fifty in levis and a straw hat came from the cabin. He had a worried gleam in his eyes.

"What are yuh doin' here, mister?" asked Farling, not unkindly.

"Doin'? Why, I'm Sam Tate. I own this farm. Bought it in Flyville last week from a man named Vernon Kling. I must say it ain't up to the glowin' description he gave me."

FARLING cocked a leg to his horn and began rolling a quirly. "Yuh bought yoreself a peck of trouble, Tate. The NI won't let yuh stay here."

Tate reddened. "Oh, they won't, huh? We'll see about that. My title's iron-clad. I checked it in Flyville."

"The title's filed and all. I know that, but if Kling charged yuh any money he cheated yuh. Yuh may actually own this quarter section but a lot of good that will do yuh."

"That's good water, in the lake." Tate motioned toward the wide, spreading pond below the little knoll on which the shack and rickety barn stood. The knoll was to the west of the buildings and had been fenced in, along with several fields. The posts had been pulled from the loose soil, however, and the rusting wire lay as it had coiled when Ed Lawson had brought his riders to smash the barrier. "I'll irrigate the fields and grow fine crops," went on Sam Tate stoutly. "See if I don't."

Jimmy Farling patiently tried to explain. "Lawson—he's the manager at the NI—won't let yuh. He scared Kling out. Besides, when it don't snow in the mountains enough that pond dries up. Every few years it happens."

Tate gulped. He knew he had been cheated by the former owner but he had been trying to make the best of it.

"I used all my savin's to buy this," he growled. "And I went into debt for supplies."

The woman, and the girl, who was around eighteen, had listened in silence. But when she heard about the water the wife said sharply, "Sam, we told you to look at the place before you paid that man the money."

It was nothing to Jimmy Farling, but he felt a streak of sympathy for Tate and his family. They had been taken in by Vernon Kling, the former tenant, who had been run off by Lawson's strong-arm tactics. Kling had known the lake went dry some seasons.

The girl's name was Barbara. She was pleasant to look upon and did not object to Farling's company. He stayed around, and she fetched him a dipper of water. They passed the time of day before he left to go back to the NI.

Farling was troubled. He was sure Ed Lawson would intimidate the Tates just as he had Kling.

At sundown Farling rode into the NI yard and dropped off Pedro. Ed Lawson, the manager, was leaning on the fence and he bugged his black eyes Farling's way. Lawson was a wide, thick-legged man with a rooster neck and a raw manner of speech. He had a high opinion of himself and a suspicious nature and he liked to make sure everybody knew he was boss.

"Yuh're late, Farling. Anything up?"

"Nothin'. I'm still on that trap for the bunch runnin' the west sections." Farling turned and began rubbing down Pedro. He would not mention the Tates. Let Lawson find out for himself.

But evidently Lawson already knew. "Looks like there's another dirt-rooter at Kling's," he said. "Yuh wouldn't savvy anything about it, I s'pose?"

Farling jumped inwardly. He knew sarcasm when he heard it and shot a look at Lawson, who blinked.

"What were yuh doin', spyin' on me this afternoon?" Farling inquired softly. He fig-

ured at once that the manager must have been watching him. Lawson had a pair of fine field glasses and perhaps had followed him out to make sure he was working and not killing NI time.

"Keep yore shirt on. I was just takin' a routine look-see, that's all. I seen the smoke. What's their name?"

"Tate. There's a woman and a girl. No rough stuff like yuh used on Kling, savvy?"

The manager's creased neck turned a shade redder and his crisp black mustache bristled. "Wait a jiffy! Who's runnin' this spread, me or you?"

"You are. From now on I ain't even helpin'. I want my time. I'm pullin' out in the mornin'."

"Suit yoreself." It took the wind out of Lawson's sail. The manager shrugged and watched Farling finish rubbing down his gelding.

The NI ranchhouse was of one story, constructed of whitewashed adobe bricks and native spruce. It had a large main room, two bedrooms and a roomy kitchen. Ed Lawson had a nice home there and Old Man Ince had furnished the place well. A woman's hand would have improved it, with curtains and such touches, but Lawson was a bachelor as were his cowboys.

Farling suspected that Lawson was feathering his own pockets at the expense of the absentee owner. It was an axiom in the land that a man ran his ranch himself or put someone he could trust in charge. Otherwise he lost. Naylor Ince had important interests elsewhere and could not give much time to the NI.

Ince had sent Farling over to catch wild horses for the outfit. His arrival in the spring had not pleased Ed Lawson. Farling wondered if the manager believed he might be a spy, planted there to check up. Lawson had weeded out his riders until he had a crew of rather sober, oldish men who preferred peace to war.

There were plenty of ways a man in a manager's position could cheat. Non-existent hands might be carried on the books. Cows could be "lost," and the recorded tally written in as lower than the actual one.

As Farling turned toward the bunkhouse Lawson said, "I'll have yore pay ready for yuh."

AFTER supper Lawson leaned out the side window and called to Farling, asking him to come in. The manager was waiting in the living room. He waved at the whisky bottle and glasses on the round table.

"Have a drink, Farling," the manager invited. "I've liked yore work and I'm sorry to see yuh quit. If yuh wish to change yore mind, yuh have the right. Anything here that don't suit yuh?"

"Nope, I just want my time." Farling was cool. Lawson must fear him to backtrack this way. It was not like the manager to try to be decent. "A bug in yore ear, Lawson. Don't bother the Tates, savvy? I'm goin' to stop there and tell 'em to keep a loaded shotgun handy." He was not afraid of Lawson or anybody else and he believed in speaking out.

Lawson's suave manner dropped from him like the cloak it was. "All right, cuss yuh. I've held out my hand and yuh've slapped it down. I'll put a flea in yore ear. Keep shut. I'm a good-hearted hombre but—" He broke off, allowing the tone of his voice to give the threat force.

"Yuh sizzle when it rains," finished Farling. He could guess what Lawson was worried about. Jimmy Farling had come from the Ince home ranch. The bronc buster might blab to the owner.

Farling liked Naylor Ince but he had only suspicions about Lawson. At the moment he had the Tates on his mind. He did not want to see them hurt, and Lawson would surely go for them. He turned to leave the room.

"Wait a minute. I ain't through with yuh yet!" shouted Lawson.

He made the mistake of grasping Farling's arm and yanking him around. Farling hit him, driving the mustached lip into Lawson's teeth. The manager staggered. His hand flexed, itching to whip the Colt at his burly hip but he knew too well Farling's speed with guns. In the tin-can puncturing contests with pistol and rifle, held behind the bunkhouse on Sunday afternoons, Farling usually won the pot.

"Get out!" said Lawson thickly, folding his arms and attempting to maintain some shred of dignity.

Farling laughed and went to the bunkhouse. In the morning he rose with the boys and said so long. He did not see Lawson around but after breakfast Hank Worth, who acted as segundo, came up and handed Farling an envelope with his pay in it.

"Lawson went to town early, Farling," explained Worth. "He said to give yuh this.

Luck to yuh and sorry yuh're movin' on."

"Obliged, Hank."

Farling saddled Pedro and with his few belongings rolled in his slicker or stuffed in his leather bags, he took the west trail. This would pass Tate's and eventually connect with a road that went through the mountain passes and into New Mexico. Flyville, to which Ed Lawson had gone, lay in the other direction, about fifteen miles southeast of the NI.

Farling had taken his time pulling out, and the sun was warm and yellow as he rode along. The morning was half gone when he reached a high spot and from it sighted Tate's buildings and the pond gleaming in the light. There had been little rain. What really counted, as far as that lake went, was the amount of snowfall in the mountains the previous winter. The melt fed through underground runs to the shallow pond basin.

He turned his head to watch a big red-headed woodpecker at work on a dead tree stump. At that instant something tore a chunk from Farling's left ear. It was a painful, jolting shock, and in that confused instant Farling thought perhaps one of those fabulous South American hornets, whose sting is said to mean sure death, had made the long drive up and landed on him to prove it.

"Zing, zou-oup!" Farling caught the voice of the heavy rifle and the echoing "flap-crack."

Someone was trying for him from the narrow ridge that paralleled the trail a quarter of a mile south, someone hidden in the brush fringing the crest.

It was instinct to pull his rein and whirl Pedro off to the right. A second bullet missed Farling by a yard and plugged into the dirt beyond before he reached a red rock upthrust which offered hasty cover. His heart was pounding and his breath came fast. Blood poured from his torn ear, soaking his bandanna and running inside his shirt collar.

Farling pulled himself together. He took his carbine from the leather socket and peeked over the rocks. But the carbine was not a long-range weapon.

"That was Lawson's rifle," he muttered, wiping blood from his jaw. "I'd know its voice anywhere! He should have had a new bolt put in like I told him." Farling had fired the manager's fine weapon on several occasions. There was a flaw in the bolt, so the special slap was distinctive.

Farling could see nothing on the ridge. He decided that Lawson, after telling his segundo he was heading for Flyville, had come out at dawn to get into position before Farling came along. On the other side of the crest Lawson's horse would be waiting, and he could scoot down and be off without showing himself to Farling.

The minutes dragged as Farling waited. He tried to draw Lawson by firing at the ridge with his light-whipping carbine, but no answer came.

There was no way of knowing whether Ed Lawson was still lying there, waiting for a better shot, or had moved off after his first misses. The safest course was to behave as though the manager still lurked in the bushes.

Protected by rock, Farling squatted down and looked around for a route by which he might retreat. He picked a high spot he could reach by rushing. There were several more which would help and a running target would not be easy to hit from the ridge. Pedro would follow him.

"Come on, Pedro." Farling jumped up and dashed for the next point, twenty yards west. No more shots came after him, and he finally swung into saddle and continued along the trail.

THE sun was high and hot when he rode up to Tate's and dismounted in the shade of the rickety barn. The torn ear might not be a serious wound but it was a very painful one, and he had been unable to stop the bleeding. His whole side seemed to be wet and his head was beginning to feel light.

On the far side of the pond a bunch of NI cows were drinking, standing knee deep in the churned water. Barbara and her mother were in the yard but keeping close to the open door so they could run inside and slam it if trouble came. Sam Tate, with a hammer and a can of rusty staples, was hastily resetting the posts knocked down and repairing the wire cut by Ed Lawson when the manager had scared Vernon Kling out of there. The fields in which Kling had tried to grow corn, vegetables and hay for tame stock had been fenced, and Lawson had laid these low as well. It was the old conflict. A farmer had to protect his crops from ravaging steers drawn to the water, while fences drove cowmen to maddened lengths.

"I wonder why Lawson didn't burn down the buildin's while he was at it," mused Jim-

my Farling. He sang out, "Howdy!"

The women had been looking the other way, fearful of the longhorns. And they were right because range cattle hated anybody afoot, and skirts were especially likely to enrage them. Hearing Farling, Barbara and her mother ventured around to the side of the shack.

"Oh, Mother! Look at his face. He's hurt." Barbara was really distressed, and Farling was surprised at the comfort he took in this.

"It's nothin' much," he said. "But I'd like a basin of water and a clean cloth if yuh can spare 'em."

"Your shirt's ruined!" exclaimed Mrs. Tate. "Babs, go and get one of father's. He can put it on while I wash and dry this one."

"I got a spare shirt with me, ma'am. Yuh're mighty good."

It was years since Jimmy Farling had had any babying such as women offered a man. Barbara and her mother astonished him when they went to work on him. They were gentle but firm and in no time had cleansed his wound, bandaged it, and had a fresh shirt on him.

He felt better after Barbara brought him a long drink of coolish water with lemon juice and sugar in it. "We brought a whole dozen lemons from town," the girl announced proudly.

A couple of longhorns came mooching slowly around the lower end of the lake. Mrs. Tate screamed, "Here they come at us!" and started for the shack.

"I'll run 'em off," offered Farling. He mounted Pedro, and the trained cowpony shooed away the steers from the vicinity with no trouble at all.

It was pleasant to bask in feminine admiration, and Farling's eyes followed Barbara as she moved about the place. She wore a fresh blue dress, and her golden hair was banded by a wide blue ribbon. She looked prettier than ever, thought Farling, and he was honest enough with himself to admit he had returned to the Tates' chiefly because of Barbara.

But idyllic as the spot seemed with the young woman near, Farling was sure that Ed Lawson would not permit the Tates to remain any more than he had the previous owner. Lawson had shown his willingness to kill in the attempt to drygulch Farling. Again and again Farling caught himself glancing toward the NI, but Lawson failed to show that day.

The Tates took Farling to their hearts and would not let him move on even had he so desired. After the shock of finding themselves mulcted in the deal, they were making the best of it.

"I'll repair the fences," declared Sam, as they rested after supper. "Then I'll put in some corn and other stuff. One bumper crop will get us out of debt for the tools and supplies we charged in Flyville."

Farling hated to throw cold water on such enthusiasm but he did caution the older man again. "Ed Lawson will try to run yuh out. Better keep yore shotgun handy."

"Shucks. I never gunned any man and don't intend to. I got a legal right here and I can fence my fields and pond."

It was no use talking. The cowman did not understand the farmer, and the farmer did not understand the cowman. The NI did not really need that lake, which disappeared when there was not enough snow in the mountains during the winter. But it was handy for a watering spot on the back range. Ince had filed on a river and big springs which were his main water supply. He had not bothered to gain title to the land around the shallow lake because it did go dry now and then. The next thing the NI had known, Kling had appeared and after being run out, had sold to Tate.

"You must rest yourself, Jimmy," advised Mrs. Tate, with a proprietary air which secretly amused Farling. "Stay right here with us until that wound heals."

"Well, mebbe I can earn my keep. I can string fence mighty fast if need be." Farling had a knack for that because in constructing traps for wild horses you had to run long lines of hidden, converging barriers to spook the scary mustangs into the pens. And he thought, "I'll hang around and when Lawson comes I'll throw a jolt into the hound." He was still angry at the manager.

Farling slept in the barn. He turned Pedro loose, for his gelding was a trained animal which would come to him whenever he whistled. Pedro would graze off but always circled back.

ED LAWSON showed up early the next morning. Farling had slept later than usual, and was still inside the barn when the NI manager rode into the yard. He had three of the boys along, fellows who would obey his orders. Most cowboys hated farmers, anyway.

"Hey, in there!" roared Lawson, pulling up his black in front of Tate's front door. "Come out!"

Farling waited. He stood in the barn and through a crack in the shrunken boards watched his enemy as Lawson made himself unpleasant. That was not a hard job for Lawson, thought Farling. The heavy rifle, the very one with which the manager had tried to pick him off, rode in a leather socket under Lawson's cocked leg.

Sam Tate emerged, blinking in the brightening light. He looked up at the red-faced Lawson, who reminded Farling of a horned toad swelling itself to scare a foe.

"Good mornin'," said Tate politely.

"What's good about it?" snarled Lawson. "With a fool hoeman like you in the picture it's danged unpleasant. Yuh cussed squatter, what yuh doin' around here? Who's raisin' them fences?"

"I am. And I'm no squatter," answered Tate stoutly. He had a stubborn streak, and Farling had to admire the way he stood up to the armed Lawson. "I got title to a quarter section includin' the lake and buildin'. I bought 'em in Flyville from Vernon Kling and the deed's all recorded."

"That's the truth," cried Mrs. Tate, who had come to the open doorway, with Barbara behind her.

"Call me a liar, will yuh!" shouted Lawson. He touched his black with a spur point. The mustang lunged toward Sam Tate and as Tate hastily jumped back out of the way, Lawson slashed him across the cheek with his quirt. "Yuh pull out in forty-eight hours! If yuh're here next time I come through yuh'll eat dirt!"

The stinging quirt had caught Tate unawares, and he stumbled and went down on one knee. Mrs. Tate and Barbara screamed. Jimmy Farling thought it was time to show himself and stepped outside.

"Lawson!" he called.

The manager jumped in his saddle and his attention left Tate and focused on the bronc buster. He was not glad to see Farling.

"What are yuh doin' here?" he demanded.

Farling rolled slowly across the side yard toward the manager. Lawson would have liked to go for his Colt but he showed little courage when up against an expert gunfighter such as Jimmy Farling. The NI men, silent in the background, made no move.

"Yuh sidewinder," said Farling contemptuously. "Hittin' an unarmed hombre is yore speed. Why not try it on me, face to face?" He brought up not far from Lawson and stuck out his jaw. His hands hung easily, and at one slim hip rode the heavy Colt in an open-work holster. He could shade Lawson any time on a draw, and the manager knew it.

Lawson glowered. Farling went on, "Yuh missed everything but my ear yesterday. Here's for that and for Tate." He was tall and he reached up with his left hand and seizing Lawson's arm, pulled the manager over and slapped him again and again in the face. Lawson fought him in sheer desperation until Farling suddenly let go and stepped back. The straining Lawson fell off in the dirt.

Still the NI men made no move. They might have interfered if it had been a fight between the boss and a stranger but they figured this was a matter to be settled by Lawson and Farling.

Lawson began picking himself up, his teeth grinding as he dusted himself off.

"Go on, get goin'," ordered Farling harshly. "If yuh bother Tate again yuh won't get off so easy."

Farling was prepared to go into a gunfight, but this was not in the cards. Ed Lawson feared him. The manager was scarlet with gury, sputtering with futile abuse. He climbed on his black and spurred off at full speed, hitting the trail back to the NI. His three men started after him and Hal Uhl, bringing up the rear, turned to wink and grin at Farling. Nobody loved Lawson, not even his trained seals.

When he had watched the manager's diminishing dust for a few seconds, Farling swung back to the Tates. Barbara's eyes were shining like stars, and there were roses in her fresh young cheeks. Her full red lips were parted and when she looked at Jimmy Farling, it made him catch his breath.

"You're wonderful!" she cried.

"Nothin' to that," deprecated Farling. "Not if yuh don't turn yore back."

The high admiration of the Tates surprised him. The red welt on Sam Tate's cheek stood out but the farmer did not care. He kept chuckling and slapping his thigh in high good humor.

"Yuh gave him what-for!" he said.

"That ain't the end, yuh savvy," warned Farling. "Lawson won't let up till yuh're out of here. He has other tricks in his basket."

The manager's high-powered rifle could

pick off a standing target at long distance. Luck and a turn of the head, plus the fact he had been moving, had saved Farling on the trail.

Farling did not want to leave. It had been his intention, or so he had believed, to move on to other parts after warning the Tates. Beside his sincere interest in assisting the settlers, there was Barbara to hold him.

He worked around that day, helping Tate on the fences and running off bunches of inquisitive longhorns that came near and worried the women. He also kept a sober eye peeled for signs of Lawson. He did not think an attack would be so direct next time, but he might catch the glint of the sun on a gun barrel or some such telltale.

A NIGHT passed and another day. Farling and the Tates were fast friends. "Why don't yuh stay and I'll go fifty-fifty with yuh?" suggested Sam Tate.

But Farling shook his head. "Farmin' ain't my style. Horses are my specialty and I don't mean tame ones like pull yore wagon."

It was hard to make it clear to the settler that grubbing dirt held not the slightest thrill. Tate had a passionate interest in growing things.

Farling was waiting for Lawson's next play. He had a straw bed in the barn and, covered by a blanket, slept with his head on his saddle.

The moon was coming up a few nights later when Farling roused. He listened. Except for the usual night sounds—the quiet stamp of Tate's work horses in the stalls, peepers at the pond, the faint sigh of the wind—all seemed to be normal, and Farling shut his eyes again. But he came to with a start just as he was dozing off.

He sat up. His bandaged ear must have interfered a bit with his hearing. But after a moment the beat of hoofs from the west told him that riders were approaching.

Farling got up. He had his gun at hand in the darkness and he kept still. His idea was that Lawson was coming under cover of the darkness, coming to deal with Tate and with him. He tiptoed to a wide crack and peeked out.

He could see the shack against the silver sky, with the moon nearly round and giving a pure light over the yard.

As he waited three dark shapes hove into his range of vision. They came around the lake and from the back trail through the mountains from the direction of New Mexico.

Farling put his thumb on the hammer spur of his pistol as the trio, silhouetted against the sky, swung toward the house. They pulled up in the side yard and dismounted. One held the horses while the other two stalked to the cabin. The man nearest Farling was tall and slimmer than his companion.

"Don't look like he's here, Devlin," said the shorter.

"What did yuh expect, Mark?" replied the tall man with some asperity. "We're two days early. This is the fourth. We're s'posed to meet him the sixth. In the mornin' we'll sneak up and signal him."

"Lawson ain't the kind to miss a trick," agreed Mark. "Say, what's that wagon doin' in the yard!"

They stopped short. "It looks sour," growled Devlin, who was apparently the leader. He wore two Colts, and Farling saw the movement of his hands as they dropped to the stocks.

"Now what do yuh reckon—" began Mark in a normally loud tone.

"Quiet," snapped Devlin. "Somebody's in there but it ain't Lawson. We'll sashay. Come back when he said to."

They turned and hurried to their mustangs, mounted and rode off around the pond.

"Tate sleeps like a log," thought Farling, as he watched them fade away. "What chance has he against Lawson?"

He squatted in the barn door, thinking it over. The visitors had sounded tough from what he had been able to make out. They had come in the night to meet Ed Lawson, not the way honest men would keep a rendezvous, but silently and on the alert.

By ten o'clock next morning Farling had the Tates' belongings packed in the wagon. He had convinced Sam Tate, and his friends were ready to pull out. There was a faint trail south which eventually reached the Flyville pike. This was the way the Tates had come. It avoided the NI which lay well to the east.

The slow wagon and Farling, riding beside it and talking to Barbara, who sat on the wide seat by her mother and father, would be visible for miles. The dust should attract Lawson's attention and the manager had fine field glasses.

Farling saw them safely to the main road. He had to reach a telegraph station as soon as possible. He had only two days in which

to work and was not sure he could bring off his plan in that short time. . . .

ONLY twenty minutes remained of the sixth day of the summer month. At midnight the new cycle would begin.

Farling stood back in the shadow in Tate's barn. "Here they come!" he whispered.

A horseman rode quietly in from the east, the direction of the NI. He scouted the shack and with a grunt got down and dropped his reins. A match flared, and Ed Lawson lighted a quirly, which glowed red each time he drew on it.

After a short wait three more riders appeared from the west trail. They were the same fellows Farling had seen.

"Devlin!" called Lawson. There was a nervous ring to the manager's voice.

The tall man dismounted, followed by the shorter, stouter Mark. The third held the reins bunched in one hand and fixed himself a smoke with the other. Such customers always kept their mounts ready for an instant getaway.

"We were here two nights ago but pulled out pronto when we saw there was somebody around," explained the tall Devlin. "Did yuh scare 'em off, Lawson?"

"Yuh were here? Our date wasn't till tonight," growled the manager. He was shaky.

"Well, we done no harm. Rode off without wakin' anybody."

Lawson swore. "I don't like it. We'll have to lay off a while. I got the creeps. I'd feel better if I'd downed Jimmy Farling."

"Farling?" repeated Mark.

"A fool that Old Man Ince sent over, a spy, I believe. And Ince's last letter asked a lot of questions about how come the ranch took such a loss last roundup. We'll quit till it all blows over."

Devlin's voice was cold and hard as he answered. "Yuh're losin' yore nerve, Lawson, and it won't do. Not with me. It's worked mighty slick for two years, ain't it? And I need cash, savvy? Had bad luck at the poker tables. We'll pick up a thousand head and run 'em through. Yuh'll cover it."

"I tell yuh Ince is leery!" whined Lawson.

"We'll hide here the next couple days while we make up the herd," Devlin said in the same metallic tone.

There was a faint pause. "All right," agreed Lawson feebly.

"That's better. Here, take a slug and cheer up."

Jimmy Farling sighed with relief. He had figured it out pretty well for himself but had not been sure that he could prove it to Old Man Naylor Ince, who stood on the other side of the barn doorway, listening to the perfidy of his ranch manager. Farling had wired Ince who had caught the first train west and met Farling in Flyville. They had brought out the Flyville marshal and half a dozen hastily sworn deputies. This force waited behind Farling and Ince. They had come up after dark had fallen and hidden themselves and their mounts in the barn.

"I've heard enough," whispered Naylor Ince angrily. "Let's go after 'em, Tooker."

Marshal Tooker, an oldish man with a walrus mustache, was at Ince's elbow. "I believe that's Blackjack Devlin and a couple of his boys," he breathed. "A tough bunch of outlaws!"

Devlin had been working with Lawson. Farling understood now why the manager had let the buildings stand. The shack and barn made a handy depot for the thieves and provided an excellent spot where Lawson could meet his confederates without the NI being aware of it. They could collect the beefs they wanted at their leisure and hook through the back way to New Mexico without being seen. It was simple for Ed Lawson, boss at the NI, to keep his riders busy well to the east while his accomplices were operating. It was simple for the manager to cover the losses on his books and was a safe way to make money at Ince's expense.

Because the shack commanded the trail a settler in there wrecked the game, and so far Lawson had been able to keep the place clear for his own purpose.

Farling, Old Man Ince, his white beard bristling, Marshal Tooker and his deputies, surged out, Farling and Ince taking the lead.

"Throw down!" roared Ince, his Frontier Model Colt up and cocked.

Farling had his pistol ready. The deputies carried revolvers, too, but Marshal Tooker gripped a sawed-off shotgun.

Lawson yelped in terror. Devlin and Mark whirled and went for their guns. The outlaw with the horses dashed down his cigarette and turned. He tried to make a draw but the startled mustangs reared and kept him busy for a moment.

A GUN flamed, and the slug whistled between Farling and Ince. The ranch owner, furious at Lawson for cheating him,

fired his Colt. Tooker's shotgun belched flame, and the buck spread. The marshal let go the second barrel on the heels of the first.

The burning lead slashed Devlin, Mark and Lawson as it fanned out in a deadly arc. The deputies dashed in, locking horns with the startled, wounded outlaws. Lawson fell, groveling, begging for mercy. Devlin kept trying but his shoulder had been laid open by a chunk of metal and he was on one knee when he was bowled over and pinned by two of Tooker's sides.

Jimmy Farling seized Mark from behind and held his arms while Ince took the bandit's guns. Somebody saw to the man with the horses, and the fight was over.

They tied the four captives and left them under guard in the barn. Lighting a lantern, Farling, Ince and Tooker conferred, smoking as they talked over the scrap. "Lawson will break rock for ten years," swore Ince.

He was a huge Texan, mighty of frame and, although gray with age, still powerful and going strong. "Yuh done right to send for me, Farling. The NI's been losin' money but I had nothin' to pin on Lawson till yuh showed up the cuss for me."

Jimmy Farling shrugged. "I'd quit the NI and was on my way when Lawson tried to kill me. I stopped here with the Tates, like I told yuh. Kling sold Tate this farm sight unseen and it's all Tate has in the world. Doesn't do the ranch any harm. That pond dries up some years and the cows can drink at the river."

Ince stared at him. "I might drop dead hearin' yuh put in a good word for a farmer! However, from now on the Tates are yore problem, providin' yuh'll take the job as NI manager. I been thinkin' I'd run more horses here to supply my Big Bend ranch." The NI was small potatoes to Ince, but no man likes to be robbed.

"What do yuh say?" pressed Ince, as Farling was silent. "Will yuh take the job? Speak up."

"I will," agreed Farling. "That is if I can have my wife live with me."

"Why not? But I never savvied yuh were hitched."

"I'm not, yet, Boss. But I hope to be soon. And if it don't snow in the mountains next winter I reckon I'll have her father and mother livin' with me, too."

A Novelet

The Circle 4 Stranger

By STEPHEN PAYNE

CHAPTER I

"Make Yourself at Home"

WHEN Connie McGuire returned home to the Circle 4 ranch, from a trip to Red Forks, she was amazed to find that the meadow was filled with cattle.

After she had ridden down the bluff, and through the dense willows bordering the creek which flowed from north to south through Circle 4's acres, she saw that these cattle carried a brand strange to her—Triangle V.

A half dozen saddle ponies had been turned loose near the buildings, and supplies from a pack-horse outfit—bed-rolls, panniers, ax, shovel, small tent and pack saddle—had been unloaded in the dooryard. Smoke was climbing from the stove pipe of the three-room log cabin, jingling spurs made music inside the kitchen, and smells of cooking food wafted through the open door.

Squint and Pokey Joe returned, leading Red Rangle's chunky old brown horse, the saddle empty

When Lafe Gordon hits Red Forks with his trail herd, girl rancher Connie McGuire is torn between growing fondness for him — and the suspicion that he is a thieving killer!

"Yo-ho in there!" Connie called. "Who're you?"

A man stepped outside, stopped dead and stared at the girl with the ash-blond hair who was riding a bay pony. A stranger, he was tall, slender and blond, with regular features and tawny hair and twinkling gray-green eyes. He was probably not over about twenty-four, a cowhand who was a bit on the devil-may-care side, yet sure of himself.

"Who're you?" Connie repeated.

"Lady," he said quickly, "please excuse me for staring. I wasn't expecting to see— Let it go for now. I'm Lafe Gordon. I've got a couple of men with me, but I sent them to ride the fence around this place. We'd be honored if you'd have supper with us, miss."

Connie's eyes and features reflected bewilderment.

"Have supper with you? Well, why not, since this is my home? I'm Connie McGuire. My mother and I own this ranch."

Lafe Gordon tipped his head to one side and regarded Connie more closely.

"I'm mighty happy to meet you, Miss McGuire. You—you own this ranch? I thought that old stage driver was sort of hiding a grin behind his hand."

"Whatever are you talking about?" she asked sharply.

The tall man laughed. "It now seems that Sam Weedhawk, the stage driver between your town of Red Forks and Deep Wells on the plains, played a joke on me. You're acquainted with the old pirate, of course? I mean, he looks like pictures of villainous old pirates."

Connie nodded, and laughed.

"I never thought of Sam as a bloodthirsty old pirate. He's really quite harmless, though he does love to spill long windies and play school-kid pranks. But I still don't see what he put over on you, Mr. Gordon."

LAFE wheeled into the kitchen to attend to something which was sizzling on the stove, then returned to the door.

"I've been on the trail eight days with my cattle," he said, with a chuckle, "coming from a place beyond Deep Wells, and for the past four or five days I have seen this stage driver occasionally and made talk with him."

"Yes?" said Connie.

"Asked him if I could buy hay and pasture up in this mountain neck of the woods. He reckoned I sure enough could. Told me about the Circle Four, and how to get to it. He told me—" a grin spread across Lafe's lean, sun-bronzed features and lighted the twinkle in his eyes— "'It's a woman-run spread. You'll find Miss McGuire a scrawny, hook-nosed ol' battle-axe with the disposition of a buzz-saw in action.' His idea of a joke, you see."

Color flooded Connie's throat and face.

"Did the old rascal mention my mother? I hope he was more complimentary."

Lafe sobered. "He made no reference to your mother. But he did say, 'For a hired man this woman's got a red-headed rooster dumb as an egg.'"

"Red Rangle," said Connie. "Have you met him?"

"Uh-huh. He's choring in the barn. Oh, yonder he comes. But won't you step down and stay a while, Miss Connie?"

Lafe stepped eagerly forward to help the girl dismount, but her feet touched ground before he could reach her. "Red" Rangle, solid and flat-featured, waddled up.

"This feller wanted to buy your hay, ma'am," he said. "I knowed you wanted to sell it, so I let him turn his cows in. Told him to make hisself to home. All right?"

"Speaking of hay," Lafe put in quickly, "how many tons? And how much per ton? Pasture thrown in, of course?"

Connie drew a deep breath. She fully realized what the sale of this year's crop of hay meant to her and her mother. It was their only real source of income. Although the value of the hay in dollars would not begin to meet all of the McGuires' bills and debts, the sale would give them a breathing spell and revived hope of making a go of the ranch.

"I can't expect more than the going price for hay," she said. "Five dollars a ton, and we have two hundred tons. You'll want to measure the stacks?"

"No, I'll take your word for it," the cowman said, and fished a wallet from one of his hip pockets. "Red, witness this deal. I am paying Miss Connie McGuire one thousand dollars in cash for two hundred tons of hay, including the customary privileges of a hay buyer."

He took worn and faded greenbacks from his wallet, and scrutinized each one as he counted it into Connie's hand. He seemed to guess that for her this was a momentous occasion; the money almost a fortune.

"There you are," he said, turning the wallet wrongside out to show it was empty, and smiling a bit ruefully. "One thousand bucks. I've been a long, long time rounding up that wad. Carried some of those old bills a couple of years. But I surely am happy to make a deal with the nicest young lady I ever—"

"Oh, stop it," commanded Connie, laughing. "Of course you tell those things to all the girls. I'll give you a bill of sale in a minute. Red, I'm too tired to ride to town tonight, but we must turn this money over to the banker at once. I'll wrap it up, and you're to take it straight to Albert Lasher."

"Sure, ma'am," said Red, and shuffled to the stable to get his horse.

Lafe followed her as she ran into the kitchen, wrapped the precious currency in a piece of newspaper. He went on about his neglected cooking chore.

"I've got regular cowboy chuck, Miss Connie," he said. "Fried spuds, venison steaks, hot biscuits. You like 'em?"

"Yes. You'll find stewed prunes and cookies in that cupboard, cowboy." Connie laughed again, and he wondered if maybe it wasn't

because she was feeling a bit lightheaded. She seemed a lot happier than she had when he had first seen her outside riding the pony.

Maybe she had needed that money—badly. He was glad he had been able to give it to her if it made her this happy.

THE shadow of Red Rangle's old brown horse darkened the open door. Lafe watched Connie go out, hand the stolid hired man the package, and watched him tuck it away under his belt.

"By the way, Red," she remarked, "Mother didn't send for me. She didn't know anything about that message I found on the kitchen table this morning."

Lafe Gordon stopped rolling out biscuit dough and turn his tawny head as if listening with the closest attention.

"That's funny," said Red. "Did you find out who writ the note, ma'am?"

"No. But it would seem, Red, as if somebody wanted me to be gone from the ranch most of today. I can't imagine why."

"Neither can I. Soon as I get this job took care of, I'll be back."

As the hired man rode away in the afternoon sunlight of a late October day, Lafe saw Connie gazing down the valley wherein lay the small Circle 4 ranch. It was as if she thought it good to see the meadow haystack-dotted. Better still to see it now spotted with grazing cattle. At the right, the dense jungle of willows along the stream met a sage brush bluff, and far away across interminable reaches of sage flats and unseen valleys, rugged foothills met blue-green mountains whose massive shoulders seemed to hold up the sky.

"Nice view," called Lafe. "Wonder what's holding up my cowboys? Must have found holes in the fence."

"More than likely," Connie affirmed. "This place has been on the skids for some years. I can't see to all the work, and I've been concentrating on raising hay."

"Sure," said Lafe. His spurs jingled as he came out and stood beside her. "Improvements cost money—hay brings in money. Too bad you haven't got cattle. Where's your mother?"

"Staying at the hotel in Red Forks, while she has a lot of dental work done."

"So? Did I hear something about a message that took you to town this morning, Miss Connie?"

"Yes. A note was on the kitchen table when I got up. Of course the doors are never locked and I thought some neighbor had left it. The handwriting was strange and there was no signature. It said: 'Mrs. McGuire is feeling much worse and wants you to spend the day with her. Sure.' But Mother hadn't sent any such word. She is enjoying herself, although she isn't having a very pleasant time with her teeth. Mother loves to be an invalid, though, and now she seems to have won Dr. Payson's sympathy. He's the dentist, a widower about her age.

"But why am I telling you such trifling things, Mr.—er— I'm going to say 'Lafe.' You call me 'Connie.' There's no reason for being so formal."

"Not a bit," said Lafe. "Especially with a cowboy who is a bachelor about your age, Connie."

CONNIE made a face at Lafe as she said, "It's time Red Rangle topped out on yonder bluff." She pointed west. "Shade your eyes against the sun and see if you see him anywhere."

"I don't see any sign of Red at all," said Lafe, after a minute. "But here come my cowboys."

Two men broke out of the willows a bit farther down the valley and loped up to the house. One rider was tall, rawboned and grizzled, stamped with the brand of the range. Lafe introduced him as "Pokey Joe" Bliss.

The other, small-framed, wiry, pinched of face and with squinting eyes, was called "Squint" Sydney.

Both men looked Connie over, not rudely, but with marked approval.

"Fence is all fixed up now, Lafe," Pokey reported. "Supper ready?"

"Ready," said Lafe. "Connie, stop straining your eyes and let's go ahead and put on the nose bag."

"Lafe," she said worriedly, "Red would be in sight for a quarter mile on the ridge. He's had more than enough time to get to the bluff, and I'd surely have seen him, if he had. I'm going out to look for him."

The cowman clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"You're imagining things," he said. "But if it will ease your mind—Pokey, you and Squint head into the willows on that trail to town and cut for sign of the red-headed jigger."

CHAPTER II
Robbery—and Death

POKEY JOE and Squint nodded and turned their horses. Lafe took Connie's arm, led her into the kitchen and seated her at the table. He brought her coffee and a plate of food he had cooked, filled a cup and a plate for himself. Then, seated across from her, he kept up a line of light chatter. He told her all about himself.

Through the years while he had worked for wages, Lafe had been accumulating a herd of cattle. At first he had run the animals with those of the big cow outfit for which he had worked, until at length the herd increased to where he had leased a small ranch to take care of them. This fall, his lease had run out, the owner had refused to renew it, and Lafe had decided to move to the mountains near Red Forks to establish himself as a cowman. He had just arrived, with his cows.

The sun had gone and twilight's hush had settled over the world. Twilight, the magic period when the world seems to pause in its busy rush, and then goes slowly and quietly to sleep. This hour Lafe had always enjoyed more than any other of the day; because he found it soothing. So had Connie—she told him so. They already seemed to understand each other, too, though they had met less than an hour ago. Lafe knew he wanted this girl to like him, as he liked her, wondered if she did. But he was unaccountably uneasy. There were other things—

He had jumped up and was at the door looking out.

"You haven't told me anything about yourself," he complained. She hurried to join him as she heard his sharp intake of breath.

Squint and Pokey Joe were returning, leading Red Rangle's chunky old brown horse, the saddle empty. Under the tan, their faces were white and their eyes grim and shocked. As they came up Pokey Joe spoke with his characteristic deliberation.

"Took us quite a spell to run down the sign on that feller, boss. He never got out of them willers. We found him, maybe fifty yards off the trail, his hoss tied close by. He'd been conked on the noodle. He's stone dead."

Lafe felt Connie tremble. She seized his arm to steady herself as if her knees had turned to rubber.

"Dead?" Lafe echoed. "The money?"

"Missin'," rapped Squint Sydney. "Sure, we cut for sign on who killed Red. But all we can say is we're stumped. Not a dogoned thing we can get a bite of and sink our teeth into. What do we do now?"

"Boys, that killer must have left some sign," Lafe protested. "Where'd he come from, and where'd he go?"

The two men shook their heads. "Don't know," grunted Pokey Joe.

Lafe looked down at Connie's head so close to his shoulder.

"This has hit you hard," he said. "It hits me too! Somebody's pulled a fast and tricky play and has got away with it. Any idea of who it can be, Connie?"

"I can't think, Lafe. But there have been a number of robberies lately. No one has the least idea of who is guilty."

"Boys, go back and cover Red's body with a tarp and leave it and everything else for the sheriff to see," Lafe ordered. "At daybreak, you can begin cutting again for sign of the killer. Connie, try to compose yourself and get a night's rest. I'm going to Red Forks."

"Rest?" she said. "I'd toss all night and have horrible nightmares. I'm going with you, Lafe."

She turned into her bedroom to get a jacket, but mentioned nothing about also getting the savings which she had been accumulating slowly and painfully for the past year to help with the expenses. Nor did she mention that she should have taken the two hundred dollars to town this morning. But worry over her mother's condition had driven other thoughts from her mind.

Like most women, Connie had considered that the safest place to hide money was under the mattress on her bed. Now, as her hand groped under the mattress, a sudden icy chill swept her and made her as cold as if she were actually frozen. The small sack containing her savings was not there!

FRANTICALLY she tore the bed to pieces and turned the mattress bottom side up. It was no good. In frenzied desperation she searched the room, though realizing that this was both useless and silly. Either last night while she slept, or today while she had been absent, someone had stolen her savings.

This, on top of the greater loss of the money Lafe had paid her for this year's hay crop and the shock of Red Rangle's murder, seemed more than she should be asked to bear.

Unless the money was recovered, she was at the end of her rope, completely licked after fighting so hard to make a go of the Circle 4.

This fight had begun before her father's death. Once he had made a good living for his wife and daughter on the small ranch, but then he had taken up with the wrong crowd in town and had begun to slip, drinking, gambling, letting the outfit go to ruin.

Connie, entirely on her own initiative, had managed to get a fair education and at eighteen she had taken a job as a country schoolteacher, sending her salary home to help Dad and Mother. She had been twenty when a wire from her mother told of Dad McGuire's sudden death. It closed with:

> You must come home to take care of the place and me.

Two years had passed since the bitterly remembered day when Connie McGuire returned home to hear such thoughtless and cruel remarks as:

"McGuire was a likable cuss, but I reckon you women'll be better off without him."

"Sure didn't leave you much, Connie. Sold every cow and horse off the place, and all the equipment as wasn't mortgaged, too."

"Ranch never was much, but now it's plumb gone to the dogs. Reckon you'll sell it for what you can get, uh, Connie? If old Money Bags Albert Lasher, the banker, don't grab it."

Connie had talked sale to Mother, who had thrown up her hands in rebellious protest. She loved the old ranch and was sure resourceful Connie could make a go of Circle 4.

One crop only could the McGuires raise on their land. Hay. Last year Connie had sold one hundred tons at five dollars a ton, to provide their sole income. She had also accumulated a few horses and three milk cows, none fully paid for yet.

This year she had managed to double the hay crop. But interest on the mortgage, taxes, store bills, hired help and incidentals ran into far more money than the value of that crop. And to cap the climax, this fall Mrs. McGuire had required a vast amount of dental work. And Dr. Payson, the dentist, as kindly as he was, had told Connie, "The least I can do this work for is two hundred dollars."

Two hundred dollars on top of all the rest! Connie had displayed something of her own bitter discouragement when she had asked, "Where'll we get the money?"

"H'm'm," Mrs. McGuire had said, "you can always get married. Why you keep putting off that nice Alexander Frade is quite beyond me. Is it pride because we're poor and he's well-to-do?"

Alex was a personable young man, but he certainly did not work for a living—just one of several things which had stopped cautious Connie from accepting him. When she asked bluntly where he got his money, he spoke largely of "investments in the East." Big business which a woman could not understand.

These high points of her struggle passed swiftly through the girl's mind in review and brought her up to this morning when she had found the mysterious note on the kitchen table.

Worrying about her mother she had ridden to Red Forks, and had found Mrs. McGuire in great form. She'd had something to talk about—how she had suffered while Dr. Payson had drilled and hammered.

"Just imagine, he says my teeth are much more sensitive and much, much harder to pull than anybody's. But, Connie, he's a wonderful man."

"Mother, did you send for me?" Connie had interrupted.

"Oh, no, my dear. Not that I didn't want you, but you seem to have so little time."

"Mother, who could have left this note at the ranch last night?"

Mother was sure she didn't know. Not that it mattered.

IN THE lobby, Connie had encountered the storekeeper, Abner Jones. Jones, bald and horse-faced and lanky, had greeted her warmly. Then he had gone on to say he hated to bring this up, but he was now carrying the Circle 4 for two hundred and eighty dollars. He simply didn't see how he could supply a winter's bill of grub on tick.

Connie had got away at length and gone to the bank, looking, as she walked, for a familiar face and figure. Where was Alexander Frade? As a usual thing Alex spotted her the minute she rode Wicket along Main Street. Perhaps he had slept late. Or perhaps, though not likely, Alex was helping Sheriff Pratt hunt for "a dad-blamed, two-bit bandit."

As Connie had told Lafe Gordon, several persons had been stuck up at night by a lone masked bandit and relieved of their cash. But not until Jed Ivers had been victimized and had howled his head off had the lazy sheriff got busy.

"Money Bags," as the cowmen called Albert Lasher, had been at work in his bank when Connie hesitatingly walked in and asked for an interview.

The banker was short and rotund and pink-cheeked. He had beamed when Connie said she had one thousand dollars worth of hay to sell. But he had frozen up tight when she had gone on:

"I know we owe you more than that for overdue interest, but I must have five hundred dollars to tide us over."

Lasher had been frightfully sorry, but surely Connie understood his position. He had been lenient when he could have foreclosed on the ranch, but now he must ask for every cent of the money she hoped to get for the hay!

CHAPTER III
Gambler's Chance

CONNIE had left the bank, not knowing which way to turn unless to Alex Frade. Head up, and with a set smile on her lips, she passed the Wild Cat Saloon and came abreast of the Club Bar. Here, lounging at the door, had been Griff McDougal, the proprietor, looking better fed than a hog ready for the butcher's block, and reminding Connie of a lazy hog.

"If it ain't Miss Connie McGuire! Man, but ye look sweet to these old eyes of mine."

"Have you seen Alex today?" Connie had asked him.

"Aha, the young man has gone bandit hunting. I see it surprises you as much as it surprised me. But yesterday evening, so Alex said, he was held up and robbed by the pesky unknown thief. So furious was Alex that at once he had Sheriff Pratt deputize him. Then he saddled his horse and hit out for the hills."

"Alex robbed!" Connie had been nonplused. "How much did he lose? Did he say, Griff?"

"He spoke of five or six hundred dollars which he had just received from his investments in the East. I rec'lect this, because when Alex shouted the news in my saloon of having been stuck up, a half dozen barflies and others showed such great interest, one might say they ganged up on him."

"Ganged up on him?" Connie asked. "Meaning—"

The genial saloonkeeper had hesitated, studying her rather shrewdly and rather uneasily before he blurted:

"It seemed Alex had been stalling off these boys on payment of I O U's he had been passing out right free, promisin' payment when some cash rolled in from his investments. Now he had lost that cash, you can imagine the concern of these tinhorns."

"Tinhorns? I O U's?" Connie's thoughts had been sent spinning. "I don't understand, Griff. Alex never had any dealings with—"

"Sure, I shouldn't have opened my big mouth and put my foot in it," the man interrupted contritely. "I—uh—the town knows of course that ye and Alex are— Excuse me, Connie." The uncomfortable Griff had slipped away from her and vanished inside his drink emporium.

But he had done far greater damage than he realized. His words had disturbed Connie even more than her mother's troubles and her own great burdens. But—well, she had thought at least Alex was man enough to resent being robbed, and had bestirred himself to try to nab the thief.

Mother had insisted that Connie accompany her on her forenoon visit to the dentist and then stay for lunch. Afterward, Connie had helped her mother get settled for her afternoon nap, reading to her for an hour or so to quiet her nerves.

Altogether, Mrs. McGuire had managed to hold Connie in town until after three o'clock, and when she had reached home she had met Lafe Gordon. Then for a little while—such a short time—she had forgotten her burdens. But now her world had crashed all about her.

Alone now in her room, she heard Lafe calling to her: "Ready and waiting, Connie."

She did not answer. Wasn't it possible, even probable, that this stranger cowman had planned the whole wicked tragedy? Connie must not let her swift liking for him warp her judgment. Lafe could have left his herd and have scouted this ranch, yesterday, or even earlier. He could have been here last

night to plant the note, and while she was in town, he could have searched the house.

It was even possible that Lafe's cowboys had murdered Red Rangle, to rob him and to return to their boss the cash he had paid Connie for the hay. One or both of the cowboys could have been in the willows and have seen the money change hands. And who except Lafe or his men could possibly have known Red Rangle was carrying money?

OUTSIDE, Lafe was getting a little impatient. He called Connie again, wondering what could have delayed her. He didn't even hear the comments of his two cowboys who were in the kitchen, rattling the lids on the stove as they fed it fresh fuel; rattling the dishes as they set out food for themselves. He glanced anxiously at Connie's door, with no faintest idea that at the moment he was the subject of her thoughts.

"I'll act as if I trusted Lafe, and when I get to town I'll talk to Sheriff Pratt and to Alex," she was whispering to herself. "To Jed Ivers, too, if he's in town. Jed will help me."

Jed Ivers had bought the Circle 4 hay last year. He was a salty old cowman who was conceded also to be the salt of the earth.

"Coming, Lafe," Connie called.

She put on a jacket, adjusted her hat, drew on her gloves and walked outside. Lafe's questioning eyes were on her as she went with steady steps to her horse. . . .

It was not a long ride, and when they reached town apparently there was nothing much going on in Red Forks on this unseasonably warm late October night. Lighted windows shone in the residence district. Along Main Street, barber shops, drug stores, pool halls and saloons were all open.

During the ride, Lafe first by gay talk and then by singing, had attempted to lift Connie's gloom. When he'd had no success he also had lapsed into silence. Women were beyond him.

They were entering the town when he said: "We may be here for some time. Let's stable our ponies. I never did like to leave a horse standing at a hitchrail for hours on end."

Connied nodded. A man considerate of horses would surely be considerate in other things.

As the two rode into the lantern-lighted entryway of the big stable, a tall man, about to swing to saddle on his own mount, turned to face them.

"Hi, Connie!" he greeted. "Who's this with you?"

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Jed Ivers," she said quickly. "Mr. Ivers, this is Lafe Gordon. We've got quite a story to tell you."

The youthful stable hostler became a still figure in the background. Lafe, tall and agile, stepped easily from his saddle and shook hands with Ivers. He sized up the white-haired, weatherbeaten cowman with marked respect. Also, with genuine pleasure. The two men exchanged casual questions and answers for a moment, then Lafe helped Connie dismount and motioned to the hostler to take all three of the saddle horses back into the barn.

"Let's go in the office where we'll be more private," Connie suggested. "I want to avoid publicity as much as possible. Though as soon as the news about what has happened gets out—" Her voice trailed off, and Jed Ivers gave her a shrewd and penetrating look.

"What the devil's wrong, Connie? Can I help?"

Jed Ivers was like that, a true friend.

Ten minutes later Lafe Gordon had told the old-timer all about the strange and tragic situation which had developed on Circle 4. He told all he knew, but of course he knew nothing about the theft of Connie's small savings, and he said nothing about it—yet.

Old Jed Ivers' eyes flashed. "Of all the doggoned sneaking, crooked work I ever heard tell, this takes the biscuit!" he exclaimed. "Got anything to add to what this danged fine young cowpuncher has told me, Connie?"

"Yes." Connie produced the note she had found early this morning. While both men were scanning it, she explained, as she had earlier to Lafe, "Mother had not sent for me. But someone took this means of getting me off the ranch."

"But why?" snapped Ivers. "Connie, I'll keep this bit of paper. Maybe I can find out who wrote it. It would seem as if the murder of Red Rangle was cleverly planned, eh, Lafe?"

"Yes," Lafe agreed. "I'd say the killer-thief was hiding on Circle Four. Probably in the willows where he saw me hand the payment for the hay to Connie. After Red got the money, he went into action. Any ideas, old-timer?"

"Meanin' any idea of who's back of it? Dog the luck, no! Reckon Connie told you I was held up and robbed? Nigh onto a month

ago. But the coyote who done it hasn't given himself away yet. The bank here'd be easy pickings for a band of renegades. Long time ago, I got cleaned out in a bank robbery and—"

"We're getting off the track," Lafe put in crisply. "Do they have open gambling in this town, Jed?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

THE tall man shrugged.

"Thought maybe I might make a stake at poker, and buy Connie's hay all over again. Who's the king-pin of your local tinhorns?"

"Uh?" gasped Ivers, as if the talk had taken an unexpected turn. "'Tinhorns?'" He grinned a bit wryly. "Well, I've lost some triflin' stakes to Stand Pat Parker. Reckon he's Red Forks' top gambler."

Connie felt sick. She was no prude, and she understood that most cowmen enjoyed drinking and gambling, which they called "fun." But she never had forgotten that her own father's weakness for liquor and games of chance had wrecked him and the Circle 4. "Stand Pat" Parker had been largely to blame, and for that smooth and silky gambler, Connie held deep personal dislike.

"Does Parker always win?" Lafe was asking.

"Nope. Just a couple-three nights ago, when I was settin' in a little game, ol' Stand Pat wanted to use a bunch of Alex—"

As if he'd suddenly swallowed his tobacco quid, Ivers stopped and threw a sort of furtive glance at Connie McGuire.

"Say it, Jed," she told him. "Don't mind me. Griff McDougal's told me that Alex had passed out some I O U's."

"Griff and his big mouth—" grunted Ivers. "I was saying, Lafe, Stand Pat wanted to use a bunch of I O U's for cash. I wouldn't stand for it. The rest of the boys wouldn't neither."

Lafe had been glancing from Connie to the old cowman. "Whose I O U's?" he pressed.

"You started to say Alexander Frade's, Jed," said Connie.

"Uh-huh, I did. You maybe heard, Connie, that yesterday evenin' Alex was robbed of a stake he got from his 'vestments and he hit the trail after the thief."

Connie nodded. "Jed, don't leave town before I see you again. Lafe, I think we should talk to Sheriff Pratt."

"All right, Connie. Pilot me to his wickiup. And stick around, Jed. Something may break tonight."

As Lafe crossed Main Street with Connie and then along one of the back streets, he tried to take her hand. He was quickly hurt when she drew away with marked coldness, but decided that her thoughts must be troubled once again. He could tell that the talk with Jed Ivers had not helped to clarify the situation. It had however helped in another way, because he had seen that the girl considered the grizzled old cowman a genuine and sincere friend. Just speaking with him had boosted her morale.

Lafe Gordon could not guess that part of her troubled thoughts were because she had gathered that he was entirely too much interested in gambling with the Red Forks' tinhorns.

They were nearing Sheriff Pratt's lighted cottage when Lafe finally did get hold of her hand.

"Why so gloomy and upset?" he asked. "Try to cheer up. Even though I did pay you for the hay and have a bill of sale for it, I want you to know I feel responsible for that thousand dollars. As for Red Rangle—well, you can't do him any good now, grieving."

"It's not that, Lafe. It's— Oh, I'm not going to tell you all my troubles."

"Get 'em off your chest," he coaxed. "Do us both lots of good. I'm right deeply concerned and sympathetic, Connie, and—and say, were you ever in love?"

"What a funny question."

"Not to me." They were in front of Sheriff Pratt's cottage now, but he kept her from stepping up to the door. "Not to me," he repeated. "And—and—Connie, I've got to know something right now. I never was one to do any waiting when I knew what I wanted. I just—"

Suddenly and unexpectedly, his arms closed around her. He pulled her to him, his head bent down toward hers as she tipped her chin down to avoid a kiss.

"Listen to me, honey!" he whispered. "Do you know that I fell in love with you at sight? Do you? They say a woman always does know such things. Connie, look at me!"

A light abruptly blazed in his eyes as she lifted her face. His lips came against hers, hard yet gentle—and all-compelling. He hoped with a deep yearning that in that brief moment she too had awakened to something as big and grand as he was experiencing.

CHAPTER IV

Bandit Hunter

SUDDENLY, Lafe saw Connie's eyes widen, as she looked over his shoulder. Behind them the door opened and in a stream of light funneling into the night, he saw a man saying good-night to Sheriff Pratt.

"Alex Frade!" whispered Connie, startled, and drew back.

But already the light had revealed her in Lafe Gordon's arms. Frade's head jerked up, and his feet seemed to freeze to the doorstep.

"Connie!" he exclaimed shrilly. "Is that you, Connie?"

With one arm still around Connie's waist, Lafe turned and looked at the two men standing open-mouthed in the doorway.

"Which one of you's the sheriff?" he calmly inquired.

"Connie, who's this?" Alex snapped, glowering at the tall cowman. "What right has he to—to—kiss you?"

Lafe could tell that she was embarrassed, but he was sure he could trust to her woman's wit to handle the incident. So he made no comment.

"Cool off, Alex," Connie said coolly. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Oh doesn't it?" thought Lafe. "Connie McGuire, my kiss proved I love you, and something happened deep inside you or I miss my guess."

Stocky, well-fed Sheriff Pratt stalked out.

"I'm the sheriff," he said to Lafe. "You want to see me?"

Lafe said, "Yes." Walking into the office-like room, he seated Connie and when Pratt and Alex Frade followed, he shut the door.

"My name's Lafe Gordon," he said. "I'm—

"I think we've got something to discuss, you and I," Alex Frade said stiffly, staring at Connie reproachfully.

"Did you find the thief, Alex?" Connie interrupted quickly. And it was plain that she didn't want to have two men fighting over her. "We heard you were bandit hunting."

"No," growled the sheriff. "Alex just now came in to report to me. He's a deputy now, Connie."

"Yes," Alex affirmed importantly. He was a big fellow with a wide, somewhat moon-like face set off by dark brown eyes and crisp black hair brushed down slick. And he now wore proudly a cartridge belt with holstered Colt .45.

"When that masked bandit stuck me up last night," he said, "I was sure he headed his horse in a westerly direction. So when night fell I rode over to the west side of the basin. I began cutting for sign at daybreak and was at it all day long. No good."

Lafe had fixed his full attention on Alex, but he offered no comment. Morover, he seemed unaware of Alex's bitter resentment and open hostility.

"So you're Lafe Gordon, hey?" the sheriff asked. "Didn't I hear a feller of that name was moving a bunch of cattle to our neck of the woods?"

"Where'd you hear it, Sheriff?" Lafe's question was sharp and eager.

"Uh? Stage driver, I guess. Sam Weedhawk."

"Is Sam in town tonight?" asked Lafe and, as Pratt nodded, "Where'll I find him?"

"Club saloon, more'n likely. Playin' seven up with two-three cronies."

Lafe turned to Connie. "You can tell the lawman and his deputy here everything that I can about the situation on the Circle Four. Perhaps more. Excuse me now, but don't go home without me, please."

He opened the door and went out abruptly.

Connie didn't know whether to be glad or sorry that Lafe was gone. But at least she could now tell Alex and Pratt of the loss of her savings, still keeping it a secret from Lafe Gordon. She had an idea that if Lafe was responsible for her loss he might by chance give himself away.

It was upwards of an hour later when, her story finished and theories advanced and hashed and rehashed by the sheriff and Alex and Connie herself, she wearily said:

"We aren't getting anywhere. It's up to you, the lawmen, to find both the thief and the man who killed Red Rangle. Get busy and do something. I'm tired and I'm going home."

SHE PAUSED, thinking if her mother knew she was in town she would want to see her. But somehow she shrank from telling her mother of the double tragedy on the Circle Four. It might be better to wait.

"I still insist that this confounded Lafe Gordon could have planned and carried out the whole business!" Alex insisted.

Connie cut in crisply: "Prove it if you can, Alex. Now, one of you hunt up Lafe and

send him to the livery stable. I'll be waiting there."

"I'll go with you!" Alex shouted as she walked out.

But the sheriff called him back and she went on alone. She was tired and sick at heart. She wondered what Lafe might hope to learn from the stage driver, Saw Weedhawk. She hoped Lafe would be waiting for her at the livery. But when she stepped into the little office, where a lamp was turned low, and sat down wearily on the hostler's cot, neither Lafe nor the hostler was in evidence.

Boots clumped on the plank sidewalk and in barged old Jed Ivers.

"Hi, Connie! I sighted you headin' this way. Nothin' on this note. I can't get a lead on whose writin' it is. What was it you wanted to talk to me 'bout?"

She drew a deep breath. "Either last night or early today somebody stole the savings I've been slowly accumulating—about two hundred dollars."

The old cowman jerked as if a bullet had hit him.

"Was that after Lafe Gordon and his men had come to your place?"

"I didn't miss the money until after I'd seen Lafe and his cowboys on the ranch, if that's what you mean."

"You didn't search Red Rangle's body yourself?"

"Oh, no. I didn't see it. I couldn't bear to see it."

Ivers vigorously rubbed the stubble on his hollow cheeks and his jutting chin.

"It's a plenty snakish deal. Did Red know you had that little wad tucked away?"

"I think he did. But you know I trusted him."

"'Course you've told Pratt, that danged lazy fathead, and Alex everything?"

"Yes, but they're no help. Jed, do you know what Lafe's doing?"

The old cowman grimaced. "These old eyes see plenty, Connie. I seen you kinder liked that feller heaps, though you was all up in the air about him, too. And at first look at him, mind you, my idea was that he'd do to ride the river with. I ain't so sure now. I ain't so sure."

"What do you mean, Jed?" cried Connie. "He wanted to see Sam Weedhawk. Do you know if he did, and what came of it?"

"Well, I've been on the prowl," said Ivers. "Lafe had a right private medicine talk with ol' Sam, though I sure don't know what about, or what came of it. Connie, I hate to do it, but I'd just as well tell you what's got me all bumfoozled about that Lafe feller. Better for you to get wise to him now than later."

Ivers shook his grizzled head and then went on as if talking to himself: "I was hopin' kinder big hopes about him and a certain sweet li'l gal I know. I never did think much of Alex Frade. Personable cuss and all that, but me, I like to see a young sprout who works his way up and makes good with his two calloused hands."

"What about Lafe Gordon?" demanded Connie.

"Now hang tight to somethin', Connie. He's been hittin' the red-eye, and he's up to his danged fool neck in a poker game with Stand Pat Parker and some other sharpers in the Club Saloon."

"Where'd he get money to play poker?" Connie asked dully. "After he paid me for the hay, his wallet was empty."

"I'll be doggoned!" Ivers blustered. "Well, somehow he got him a stake for poker. Connie, let's you and me go watch that game. It might just prove plumb interestin'."

Connie was stunned. "Go with you to watch a poker game—in a saloon? Me?"

"Sure. Why not? I'll be with you, won't I?"

"Can't you see that I'll never have anything more to do with Lafe if he's drinking and gambling. Oh, darn it, Jed. You were right. I did like Lafe Gordon, But now—"

THE OLD cowman lifted her to her feet. His eyes were unnaturally bright. In them was a suspicious trace of moisture, too.

"Connie," he said, "I like you as much as if you was my own daughter. But bad as it looks for Lafe, I got a whalin' big hunch he's playin' some deep game and knows just what he's about, whether he's drinkin' or not. Won't hurt none to look on for a spell. I'll take care of you."

The Club saloon, brightly lighted by two large and ornate lamps suspended from the ceiling, reeked of stale beer and tobacco smoke. The long bar was deserted, all the men present being huddled in a group close to a green-topped round table in the far corner of the room.

It seemed as if the table had been so placed that onlookers could not wedge back of it into the corner, and someone had thought-

fully opened a window nearby to freshen the foul air. Around that table sat five men—one named Osa Dawson, whose back was to the window, Lafe Gordon at Osa's right, and beyond Lafe, Stand Pat Parker, sleek and well-dressed. The other two men were strangers.

Lafe Gordon's hat was pushed far back and, hair tousled, he was slouching in his chair. Apparently he had not even noticed Connie and Ivers. His eyes stared vacantly and when he asked for cards or muttered, "I'm stayin'," his voice was blurred and uncertain.

"The jigger's a poker player, anyhow," whispered Jed Ivers to the embarrassed girl, excitement glinting in his faded gray eyes. "Jus' lookit the stack of dinero he's raked in!"

Gold, silver and greenbacks were in the stack in front of Lafe. The audience watching the game was spellbound. Griff McDougal, Albert Lasher and Sheriff Pratt were there, and four other townsmen; three punchers from different outfits, and swart, black-mustached Sam Weedhawk who looked more like an old renegade than a harmless stage driver. Alex Frade was noticeably absent. Connie was glad of that, for undoubtedly Alex would have upbraided her.

So absorbed were all these onlookers that not one appeared aware of a girl's presence. Such complete silence held them that they had forgotten cigars and cigarettes clamped in their lips. Jed Ivers wedged in close, Connie hanging to his arm, and feeling the powerful fascination and pull of a game that for some reason had become deadly serious. Tension gripped all these men.

"Up twenty bucks," mumbled Lafe, shoving in two gold pieces.

He held his cards bunched in his left hand, and the supple fingers of his right toyed with a twenty-dollar bill which he was scrutinizing with marked interest.

"Call your raise and hoist the pot one hundred bucks, Gordon," stated Stand Pat's flat, emotionless voice.

He reached to his hip pocket and brought out a billfold.

"Thought we were playing for table stakes only," another player objected.

"All three of you boys have dropped out," said the gambler. "Makes no never mind to you on this hand, and I figure to tap Gordons' stack—if he's game."

"Game," said Lafe briefly.

CHAPTER V
Thief and Killer

WITH a careless gesture, Stand Pat slipped greenbacks from his wallet, tossed them carelessly into the pot.

Methodically and unhurriedly Lafe counted one hundred dollars from his stacks of cash.

"I've got ninety seven more here, Stand Pat. It'll cost all of it to see my hand." He shoved in the balance of his money.

Old Sam Weedhawk's rasping breath could be plainly heard. Others seemed to have entirely stopped breathing.

"The fool!" Jed Ivers panted. "He'll lose his shirt."

Stand Pat Parker lifted his eyelids to send a sharp glance at Lafe Gordon. He hesitated and the silence tightened. Then wordlessly, Stand Pat counted out exactly ninety-seven dollars and gave it a shove toward the center of the table.

"Can you beat a full house, hombre? Aces on top?"

The gambler spread his cards face up. Three aces and two kings.

"Uh-huh," said Lafe and flipped his own hand, face upward. "Jus' a little straight flush, mister."

Lafe reached across to the center of the table and picked up one of the greenbacks Stand Pat Parker had put in. There was a rustle of movement and short, hard breaths. Just as suddenly these sounds stopped and again tension held players and onlookers as Lafe Gordon said, his voice no longer either thick or blurred:

"Where'd you get this ten-dollar bill, Stand Pat?"

"Huh?" ejaculated the gambler, sitting bolt upright, his eyes popping wide open.

"Where'd you get it?" Lafe's challenge was harsh and cold and deathly grim. His eyes, no longer those of a seemingly drunken man, had locked with Stand Pat's. "I want to know," Lafe persisted. "And mighty quick, too."

The gambler started to swear. Then he snapped, "No reason I shouldn't tell you, Gordon. I got it from—"

The booming crash of a shot silenced Stand Pat Parker. The flash of the gun showed that

it had been fired through the window. Even as the report roared the gambler's body jerked. He slumped against the table and slid to the floor.

In the same second Lafe Gordon ducked sideward out of his chair and hit the floor—not a moment too soon. Again gunfire flashed at the window and again the room rocked to a thunderous report.

In the moments that followed everything was confused. Sheriff Pratt leaped toward the door. Jed Ivers shouted:

"Get behind the bar, Connie! Quick!"

Then he followed the sheriff outside. The men at the table scattered like frightened quail, and Lafe Gordon came to his feet to blast three shots through the window.

Only a moment after Pratt and Ivers had gone out through the batwing doors of the saloon, Alex Frade plunged into the room. He skidded to a halt, shouting:

"What happened? What happened?"

Lafe and Albert Lasher, who were having their look at Stand Pat Parker, looked up.

"Parker's dead," the banker answered. "Somebody shot him through the window."

"I'm a deputy sheriff!" exclaimed Alex. "So I'll take charge. Why was Parker shot?

Lafe, with his pocket knife, was digging a bullet out of the floor—the bullet which had so narrowly missed him. He was not drunk at all. He had just been pretending. Lafe lifted himself erect and answered Frade.

"I'll try to explain it. But I want Sheriff Pratt and Jed Ivers and the doctor to be here when I do."

"Here I am," said Dr. Ardmore who heard Lafe as he entered with Pratt and Ivers.

"We were a gnat's eyewinker too late," Jed Ivers growled. "Bushwhacker who'd fired the shots had lit a shuck. Pratt and I figured no darned use huntin' him in the dark."

"Don't anybody go away," ordered the sheriff. "All of us who were in here were witnesses to—" His roving gaze stopped on Connie and he exclaimed: "Connie McGuire! This ain't no place for you!"

"I brought Connie here," said Ivers.

Lafe Gordon's harsh expression relaxed slightly as he looked at her.

"Mighty tough stuff for a girl to see," he said. "But I'm glad you're here, Connie."

"Oh, you are!" Alex Frade ripped out savagely. "For a Johnny-come-lately, I must say you—"

"Dry up, Alex," Sheriff Pratt cut in. "Settle your fight with Gordon after this business is over. Now we all know that just before he was shot, Stand Pat was going to tell Lafe where he'd got hold of a certain ten-dollar bill. What was so all-fired important about that greenback? Start talkin', Lafe."

Lafe said something to the doctor, who was bending over Parker's body, then he took his stand by the table where the currency in that last jack pot remained unmolested. In this brief interlude, Jed Ivers grabbed Sam Weedhawk's shoulder and demanded:

"Sam, what'd you and Lafe make medicine about?"

Old Sam nodded and said:

"Lafe wanted to know who all I'd told about him a-trailin' his cattle here. Particular, he wanted to know if I'd said he was most likely sure to head into the Circle Four Ranch."

The significance of such information to a man planning a robbery was plain.

"Who had you talked to, Sam?" asked Jed.

"Well, I'd mentioned Gordon's being on the trail to Pratt, and I rec-lected spoutin' off to Stand Pat Parker as how I'd told Lafe Gordon about the Circle Four hay," said the driver. "Lafe said of course Stand Pat could have told somebody else, but he, Lafe would try workin' on the gambler. I staked him to get in a poker game with Stand Pat, and—"

"Quiet!" Ivers interrupted. "Lafe's talking."

A hush had fallen over the room and Lafe's was the only voice to be heard now.

"The important thing about this greenback," he said, picking up one of the bills, "and about several others that made their way into the game, is that they are the same bills I paid Miss McGuire for hay earlier today. You see, men, I've developed an odd habit of looking close at greenbacks I happen to take in, and I can spout off an almost complete list of the serial numbers of the ones I handed to Miss McGuire."

Lafe paused, and the men all exchanged glances. The sheriff put into words what they must have been thinking.

"By golly, boys, that means Stand Pat had some of the dinero that was stole off Red Rangle when he was killed and robbed. Looks like Stand Pat was guilty of that. Doc Ardmore, you find any money on Parker?"

"None," said the doctor. "Apparently he emptied his pockets and his wallet for that last jack pot."

Griff McDougal spoke up. "Fine theory all right about Stand Pat being the thief, but

no good. He was in town all today."

"Uh?" Sheriff Pratt's face fell.

"Then he couldn't have robbed Red Rangle," the sheriff said. "Sa-ay! Stand Pat was going to tell Lafe where-at he got that bill. He wasn't none worried about it, neither."

"But the man who shot Stand Pat was most awful afraid of what he was going to say," Lafe pointed out. "Find that lobo, Sheriff, and you've got the thief and killer."

"Never will find him now," mourned Pratt. "Stand Pat can't talk, and seems like nobody else knows nothin' about the slippery coyote. Same man who's been doin' all the robberies, I ain't a doubt."

"So we're right back where we were," declared Alex.

Lafe had been toying with the currency on the table. "Only two hundred of the thousand dollars I paid Miss McGuire is here," he remarked. "The thief probably still has the balance. Don't lose hope too quick, Sheriff. Have you got it, Doctor?"

"Got what?" demanded Pratt and Alex.

"The bullet that killed Stand Pat," said Lafe.

Doc Ardmore nodded.

"Here's the one I dug out of the floor," Lafe went on. "Both fired from the same gun. Sheriff, Ivers—all of you who were here when the shots were fired are in the clear, but by jiminy, we're going to start combing the town for the gun from which these bullets were fired. I can make the tests myself!"

Abruptly Lafe switched to order Alex Frade: "Don't leave, Frade. Meeting's not over. You weren't in the room when the shots were fired. Let's start with your gun."

QUIETLY SPOKEN words, yet a strange, terrifying. but exciting thing happened. Alex Frade's face turned sickly gray under its tan. "I'm a deputy sheriff!" he expostulated wildly. "Pratt, tell this darned fool to lay off me."

Lafe bent forward. "Got something to be afraid of?" he asked Alex tensely. "If not, let's see your forty-five."

Lafe saw it all right. So did everyone else, as Frade whipped his Colt free of its holster, shouting: "You meddling stranger, I'll—"

He neither finished nor had time to fire. Lafe's long body slid forward with the speed of a striking snake. His head and shoulders rammed into Alex Frade's midsection, and as he straightened he threw Frade over his back. The man's body crashed against the floor and Lafe wheeled and kicked the gun across the room. He bent over Frade and rose with a money-belt in his hands.

For moments no one moved or spoke. Frade was out cold. Lafe looked at what was in the money-belt. Finally he spoke.

"Here's the rest of that hay money," he said, "as well as I O U's for two hundred dollars, which apparently Stand Pat had returned. Here in another pocket is approximately two hundred dollars. . . . Who besides Red Rangle has been robbed recently by your bandit?"

"That's Connie's too!" boomed Jed Ivers. "Lafe, boy, you've sure done noble. Ha! So the dinero Alex said he got from his Eastern investments was really stolen—the cash he robbed me and others of! Yeh, and he even robbed Connie, figuring maybe the sooner she lost the ranch, the sooned he'd win her."

"Don't talk about it," cried Connie. "Please, Jed, take me to the hotel. I can't stand it here any longer!"

"Not my job," the old cowman put in. "Lafe, you take over for me, and I'll take over the rest of your job here. I'll take care of that cash on the table for you, too."

Lafe took over gladly, and in moments had Connie outside, under the stars, where the air was sweet and good. He had his arm around her and they moved slowly along the silent street. "Connie, darling," he whispered, "let's go partners. I've got cattle and you've got a ranch, and—"

"Let's go partners!" she repeated ecstatically as though the words rushed out before an unpleasant recollection could crowd into her happiness. "But we can't! Mother owns half the ranch."

He laughed softly at her troubled tone. "Connie, you didn't get around town enough this evening. Sam Weedhawk told me Mrs. McGuire was telling everybody who'd listen of her engagement to Dr. Payson. Sam said she was happier than any girl bride he'd ever seen, talking about the lovely home she'd have in town. . . . Why, Connie, what's the matter? You're crying."

"It's—it's nothing, Lafe. It's just I'm so darned happy that—that I just can't help crying. After all the tough going—"

"We'll see to it that life's never bitter or tough going for you again," Lafe assured her.

He drew her close, kissing her for the second time on this eventful night. And this time Connie struggled not at all.

Coleman's fist thudded against Andrus'

A Complete Novelet

Hangnoose for

Clint Coleman Returns to Storm Ridge Ready

CHAPTER I

Storm Ridge Trail

EACH turn of the wheels of the big Concord was carrying Clint Coleman deeper into country that was becoming more and more familiar to him. Since the crossing of the Hondo, the patches of sky between the enormous, slow-rolling white clouds, had seemed a purer, brighter blue. The air, too, now that they had climbed from the timbered valley and were rolling on the high mesa, smelled and tasted gloriously of mesquite and sage.

The grass—what there was of it—was green and lush, and the cactus was in bloom. It was hard to believe that there was snow

jaw and the ex-barkeeper went down

a Prodigal

By PAUL S. POWERS

in Santa Fe. Spring was a good time of the year to be getting home, and there were moments when Coleman felt like shouting a song from the coach window. Then the thought of the dark past, and the dangerous future would blot out the sunlight for him. Just as the steel bars of the New Mexico penitentiary had done for more than three grinding years.

There would be no more scheduled stops now until Storm Ridge, the end of the line, for they had passed the limits of the Mescalero Apache Reserve and were heading southwest, with the blue and wrinkled Sacramentos looming ahead in the far distance. Another twenty miles, and he would know the answers to the questions that were gnawing, wormlike, at his heart. No, it was

to Pit Gun and Fist Against Ruthless Foes!

eighteen miles exactly, for they were just passing the towering landmark known as the Devil's Hatpin. Soon they would be at Last River.

Now that he knew their destination was the same as his own, Clint Coleman appraised his two fellow travelers with a new and sharpened interest. The girl, who looked pale and drawn, was sleeping on the seat across from him. It had been a long trip for her; probably she had started from Santa Fe, for she had been in the coach when he had boarded it in Glorieta; that had been days ago, and they had covered more than three hundred miles since then. She hadn't slept, at first, but had stared out of the windows with those sad, dark eyes.

THEY were closed now, but the long, black lashes were trembling slightly on her cheeks. From the first he had wondered a little about this mysterious young woman. But not too much. His mind was thoroughly occupied with someone who was almost her exact opposite: a smiling, blue-eyed girl with hair as golden as the sun.

The gaunt, frosty-eyed man who was eagle-perched on the same seat with Coleman had muttered the name "Duffy," by way of introduction, when he had transferred from the White Oaks coach early that morning. Since then he had been as silent as the bird he so much resembled; his sharp beak seldom turned to the right or left, and his piercing gaze was fixed straight ahead.

Coleman had felt a warning thrill at his first glimpse of Duffy, for "Law" was stamped all over this weather-hardened hombre of sixty, although there was nothing in his dress, not even a badge, to indicate his business. Under his short coat was a long pistol-holster, and at his feet a big-caliber Winchester rifle.

Duffy's armament reminded Coleman of his own destitution. Not only was he weaponless, but his last two-bit piece had gone for the coffee and hardtack at breakfast-time. It was the last of the money he had borrowed from a friend in Glorieta, the same one who had furnished him with the patched flannel shirt, torn denim pants, and the battered sombrero he was wearing. Worse than anything were the boots, a size too large, and with heels so run-over that his long legs seemed more warped than was naturally the case. He was a saddle-tramp—without even a saddle. He was down to his last cigarette paper.

The coach was rumbling downgrade now, approaching the sloping banks of Last River. It wasn't much more than an arroyo, ordinarily, but heavy rains in the mountains had swelled it until it now approached fifty yards in width, a swift but shallow brown torrent, Pecos bound. The driver's long whip popped as the leaders of the six-horse team faltered and fought leather at the edge of the flood. Clint Coleman thrust his head from the window to yell at the driver.

This was a treacherous crossing at high water, not because of the rushing water itself but because of what lay beneath it. The team should have been turned to the left of a certain black boulder, a landmark that Coleman well remembered. Instead, the snorting, protesting horses were driven well to the right of it.

"Hey, you, pull up!" Coleman called to the wielder of the whip. "You're headed into trouble. Quicksand!"

The driver's sarcasm came down in reply: "You think you savvy more about this trail than I do, *muchacho?*"

"Even your horses savvy it more than you do!" Coleman shouted back. "Swing 'em to the left, *pronto!* Well it's too late now. Here we go!"

The nervous team had begun to flounder, halfway across the ford. The Concord stopped, was jerked forward a few yards more, and then began to settle slowly. The horses, threshing vainly, had sunk nearly to their bellies, and neither the lash of the driver nor his profane bellowings helped much. Coleman advised him to unhitch, and after a few minutes of confusion this was accomplished by the stage man and the express guard who shared the seat with him. Freed from the heavy coach, the animals soon struggled their way to firm footing near the opposite bank.

BY THIS time the Concord was bogged hub-deep, but Coleman grinned reassuringly at the girl passenger. She had awakened amid the hullabaloo in the middle of the river, and he couldn't blame her for being frightened.

No, there was no danger, he told her. Yes, the stage-coach would sink clean out of sight —in a week or two.

"This quicksand ain't as quick as you think, Miss," he said, more matter-of-fact than gallant. "But to be on the safe side, I'll carry

you across, and keep you from gettin' wet, anyhow."

It was no trick, at all. As long as one slogged through in a hurry there was no risk of a man being mired down, and when the girl was on the dry bank Coleman went back to help the stage man. The driver and the express messenger thought it necessary to salvage the mail and the packages, and Coleman lent a hand at this. The puzzling Mr. Duffy remained perched in the coach, his inscrutable eyes missing nothing of what went on.

In getting some of the cargo ashore Clint Coleman managed to drop a heavy parcel of Santa Fe newspapers. It sank from sight and the sand held it, Coleman making certain that it did by standing on the bundle for a few moments with both feet. Neither the black-whiskered driver nor the freckled young express guard saw it disappear, Coleman was confident, but of Duffy he wasn't so sure. A little later he helped the expressman check the waybills, and the loss was noted.

"Storm Ridge won't get no papers for another week now," the guard grunted. "I'll catch blazes, but it could be plenty worse. We might've lost the mail, or the registered packages. Say, fella," he blinked at Coleman, "you seem wise to Wells Fargo business—I could tell by the way you handled them receipts. Was you ever with the comp'ny?"

"For a while," Coleman admitted. "Is Cliff Kellogg still the agent at the Ridge?"

The express messenger shook his head. "Nope. It's been an hombre named Baldwin ever since I went to work on this line. But I've heard about Kellogg—kind of a crippled fella, ain't he? Well, he's a professional gambler now at the Antlers."

Coleman's lean face remained expressionless, but he felt a crawling revulsion as the man talked on. Kellogg had hit the skids for certain—a cheap tin-horn, a failure and a disgrace in spite of a man's sacrifice and the love of good women. Of course, he had known in the beginning that Cliff Kellogg was warped morally as well as physically, but he had hoped— What was the freckled youngster saying?

"I heard that a fella who worked in the Wells Fargo office with Kellogg stole a money package and got sent to the pen for it. Happened three-four years ago."

"He was a fool," Coleman said softly. "Well, let's pull that coach out of there."

There was a coil of strong rope in the boot of the Concord, and although the bearded driver swore that it couldn't be done, the coach was soon yanked from the sand and dragged up to the bank. On firm footing, the team made easy work of it after the men heaved the wheels clear.

Duffy had removed his footgear and socks in order to help, and while the horses were being harnessed again he roosted on the riverbank looking more like a vulture now, than an eagle, Coleman thought. The old man's bright, piercing gaze made him uncomfortable.

He didn't feel any easier when, while Duffy was assisting the girl into the rescued coach, those sharp eyes met his at close range.

"Good work, young man," he said, his voice dry and brittle. "Thanks to you, we're only an hour behind time. Not much harm done. Nothing lost except a bundle of newspapers."

THE coppery sun had slid behind the valley wall when Coleman caught his first glimpse of Storm Ridge, a cluster of frame and adobe buildings in the hollow of the valley, a little larger than when he had last seen it, but stark and ugly as of old. In the distance the houses resembled the scattered headstones of a graveyard, standing in sharp relief against a sky the color of blood.

"Is that—where we're going?" the girl asked, and Coleman was a bit pleased because the question was addressed to him rather than to Duffy. Come to think of it, carrying her ashore awhile ago hadn't been such an unpleasant chore.

"Yes, that's Storm Ridge. Not as bad, in some ways, as it looks. In other ways, it's worse," he said, his strong, white teeth gleaming in a smile. He hoped that he could get her to say something about herself. "Will somebody be meetin' you, Miss?'

She studied him, apparently for the first time in all the days and nights of travel. She might have thought his face rather formidable, for the cleft chin jutted stubbornly, and a fiery temper smouldered behind the wide-spaced blue eyes. He had once been deeply sun-bronzed, but his skin was now like bleached-out leather.

"I'm going to work at a place called 'The Antlers,' " she told him. "I answered an advertisement."

"But you can't go to a place like that!" Coleman protested emphatically. "It's not decent. You're not that kind of people. Don't

you know that the Antlers is a saloon, dance-hall, gamblin' hell proposition?"

When he saw the girl's somber eyes widen at him he was surer than ever that she wasn't the Antler's sort. Duffy, who couldn't have helped overhearing, smiled ironically at the younger man's outburst.

By this time the stagecoach had passed the outskirts of the town and was turning into the wide, rutted main drag. It halted in front of the combined station and post-office, a small building sandwiched between the two-storey San Antonio Hotel, and the false-fronted saloon which had once been the Acme, but which now had "EDGERTON'S PALACE" emblazoned on a newly painted sign-board. Down on the corner was the Antlers, the largest structure, with the exception of the courthouse, in Storm Ridge.

Duffy, who was seated nearest the sidewalk side of the coach, was the first to step out. He gave Coleman a quick backward glance, then carried his rifle and gear into the hotel. As the stage was late, few were waiting in front of the station, but Coleman spotted Mike Andrus standing expectantly under the arcade.

Coleman's jaw tightened at the sight of him. In the old days he had been one of the Antler's bartenders, but it seemed evident that the dark-skinned Mike had risen in the world. He was wearing a snowy linen shirt, a black broadcloth coat, and a pair of fancy boots which, like his wide-brimmed hat, must have cost a pair of double-eagles.

"But what shall I do, if I don't take the position I accepted by letter?" the girl was saying, while Coleman was wrestling her suitcase down from the roof of the Concord.

"Leave that to me," he said cheerily; then he turned sharply at the edge of the sidewalk, straightening to his trim and powerful six feet. Andrus had approached the girl with doffed hat.

"Miss Thatcher?" he said smoothly, and when she nodded in surprise. "I'm Mr. Andrus, the manager of the Antlers. Have a nice trip? I must say," he smirked, "you look even prettier than the tintype picture you sent with your letter. Now if you'll just let me have your baggage—"

COLEMAN'S voice broke in like the beat of a hammer on an anvil. "Rattle your hocks away from here, Mike. Get—goin'!"

Andrus noticed Coleman for the first time, and his loose-lipped mouth sagged in astonishment. Then it twisted upward in a sneering grin of recognition. "Well, if it ain't the jailbird! How time does fly. By your looks, thievin' don't pay." His contemptuous little eyes, like black glass beads, had traveled over Coleman, had probably noted the fact that he wore no gun. Andrus' shooting hand was hovering near his own weapon; Coleman saw the gleam of a pearl-butted revolver as his unbuttoned coat gaped at the motion of his arm.

"Go get yourself heeled, Coleman," Andrus taunted. "Then if you still want to horn—"

"I am heeled—with this!" Clint Coleman's quick step forward had taken him within reaching distance of Andrus' jaw—exactly. He'd always disliked the ex-barkeep, and his labor-hardened fist was weighted with fury. The manager of the Antlers landed, legs in air, with a force that smashed a board in the sidewalk.

As Andrus rolled over, his face and clothing mottled with dust and blood, Coleman jumped after him and kicked his gun from its holster. He sent it splashing through the green scum that covered the water in the nearby horse-trough. Then he walked back, picked up the girl's suitcase and took its owner by the arm. When she resisted a little, he tightened his grip.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he said, grimly, leading her toward the hotel. "I'm not playin' cards for you, Miss Thatcher. Get it straight. I'm safely engaged to another young lady. But while you're in this town I'm going to see that you get a square deal."

CHAPTER II

Wayward Son

OLD Sam Mills was still the clerk at the San Antonio, a little drier and more withered, but otherwise the same wispy man Clint Coleman remembered. They had known each other only casually, but Mills instantly recognized Coleman as he approached the desk; he thrust out his hand in greeting, withdrew it, then reached out again.

"Clint! Glad to see you!" he piped, with an embarrassment Clint could well understand. What does one say to an ex-convict?

The clerk hadn't heard the commotion

outside, and he blinked questioningly at the girl, and then again at her companion. Coleman explained briefly, as he scrawled his name on the register with a hand that still stung from its impact with the jawbone of Mike Andrus. He noticed, on the line above, the still damp signature of "John Duffy, Albuquerque."

"Give Miss Thatcher the best room in the place, Sam. I'll take a shakedown anywhere —I won't be goin' out to the ranch until tomorrow, I reckon."

"Ranch? Your father sold the Rafter KJ," the clerk said. "Quite a while back. You didn't know?"

"Lots of things I've got to catch up on, I guess." Coleman shrugged, after digesting that bit of news. "Listen, Sam. I've still got thirty-four dollars in the Stockmen's Bank, unless the interest has done eat it all up," he chuckled. "Give me a blank check, if you can spare the cash, and take out what I owe you for the rooms—for *my* room," he added quickly, seeing that the girl had flushed and was opening her purse.

Sam Mills hesitated before complying with the request. Only for a moment or two, but Coleman noted it and felt a stab of pain. It was a sample of what he could expect from now on, even from men well disposed toward him. He wore a thief's brand, a deep burn that would probably mark him for all time. He was all the more pleased then, when Miss Thatcher offered her hand to him when saying good-by.

"Thanks for what you've done, or tried to do. You meant well, I'm sure," she added enigmatically. "Watch yourself. And my name—it's Theresa."

"Mine—is Jailbird—Mike Andrus had me tagged right," he admitted bleakly. Then the warmth in her eyes melted the ice, and they both laughed.

Coleman left the San Antonio for the Red Star Restaurant, two doors down, where he invested half a dollar in a thick, juicy beefsteak, and trimmings that included fried potatoes, coffee, and a slab of dried-apple pie. As it was his first chuck since morning, he made a ceremony of it, eating without haste and with infinite enjoyment.

The place was well crowded, and half the customers recognized him. Only a few nodded, however, and nobody sang out "Clint!" as in the past; but he didn't let the ostracism spoil his appetite. On his way out, he met someone who did call him by name. It was "Blackstone" Smith, the county judge who had sentenced Clint to prison.

"Hah! Wasn't expecting to see *you*, young Coleman. Been released, eh?" The squat, baldheaded lawyer showed his yellowed teeth in what was meant for affability.

"Looks like it, don't it, Blackstone?" Clint had little use for Judge Smith. Not that he blamed the man particularly for sending him "up the rio" to Santa Fe; after the guilty plea, Smith couldn't have done otherwise. But there was an odor about the little hombre—spiritual, not physical—that wasn't the smell of lawbooks.

"Seen your father yet, boy?" the judge had to crane his head back in order to peer upward at the "boy's" face.

"I'm on my way there now. He's in good health, isn't he?"

JUDGE Smith nodded. "Fairly, I'd say. But overworked, boy. He's a little old for the game he's in." Blackstone Smith sighed, fingering his black shoestring tie. "Sometimes I worry about him. He's aged considerable since you—I mean, it was quite a blow to him——"

Ironically polite, Coleman suggested that the judge save some of his solicitude for his own advancing years. Stepping past him, he strode from the restaurant. The hypocrite! He detested insincerity. If Blackstone was a friend of the elder Coleman, it was a new thing. Still, the judge's words had hurt. Clint realized that others had suffered more than himself.

He retraced his steps past the hotel, noticing that a new store had been built on a lot that had been vacant. It bore the sign: "EDGERTON MERCANTILE COMPANY," and Coleman pursed his lips in a low whistle. He crossed a narrow side street, continued halfway down the block, and paused before a small, square adobe. SHERIFF'S OFFICE in peeling gilt letters glistened on the dusty front window. He hesitated, then he squared his broad shoulders and lifted the thumblatch, swinging the door wide.

The sheriff, who was alone in the littered room, was standing up to light the overhead lamp, and he had just applied the match to the wick when Clint Coleman entered.

"Howdy, dad." Clint greeted him.

Sheriff Walter Coleman swung around. He was a big-framed man, a little shorter than his son, with a massive chest and a thick neck that supported a leonine, square-jawed

face. His hair, worn long, was like a mane streaked with silver, but his heavy, drooping mustache was still the color of new rope.

For a long moment he stood in silence, the match still flaming in his fingers. He didn't smile, but his eyes began crinkling at the corners. All at once, his huge paw went out toward young Coleman.

"Gosh almighty, Clint! Is it really you?" He pulled his son toward him, then pushed him out at arm's length in order to look at him. "Where did you get that tramp outfit?" He laughed boomingly. Then he grew serious. "I shorely wasn't expectin' you. They must've cut quite a chunk off your sentence for good behavior, eh? Well, sit down."

Clint Coleman dragged a chair from a corner and put it down beside the sheriff's swivel. He reached for the makings he'd bought at the Red Star and rolled a brown cigarette.

"You're lookin' pretty good. *Qué tal?* Blackstone claims you're overdoin' it."

The sheriff sliced a chew of tobacco from a plug he took from a desk drawer. "The judge and his friends hope I won't be runnin' for office again this fall. That's all. I was never better. Did you just get in, Clint?"

"'Bout an hour ago. Stage was late. We got stuck at Last River." Clint dragged deep on his cigarette. "Hotel clerk tells me you've sold the Rafter."

"That's so. With you away—well, I sort of lost interest in the old place, Clint." The sheriff looked somberly at his son. "That was over a year ago. When you didn't write, I quit sendin' you letters. Figured you was proddy. Sorry about it."

"Nobody wrote. When *she* didn't write any more I nearly went loco," Clint Coleman said savagely. "Yes, I mean Belle Kellogg. Is she all right?"

HIS father's aim at the cuspidor was accurate. He wiped his mouth with his bandanna before replying, and it was obvious that he didn't relish the subject.

"That girl's well, so far as I know. Saw her in town a few days ago with her folks. It was her father," he explained, "who bought the Rafter KJ. I sold it cheap enough—two dollars an acre—so I can't let what's happenin' now bother me too much."

"What *is* happening?" Clint demanded.

"Jay Edgerton is about to gobble up the ranch, same as he's swallered every good spread between Last River and Sacramento Mountains." Walter Coleman snorted disgustedly. "Jay has made a lot of headway since you left, Clint. Notice his new saloon? Well, he owns the biggest store, now, as well as control of the Stockmen's Bank. And of course he owns the Antlers. Jay is as smooth as a rattler that's just shed its skin. He hasn't shed his fangs," he added with a grim laugh. "His gunmen crowd is still with him—Slim Jim Cannon, Nesswilder, Seth Crawford."

"Mike Andrus seems to think he's one of the expert pistol boys, too," noted Clint, blowing a slow blue cloud of smoke toward the lamp.

"They're kill-crazy, all of 'em," growled the sheriff of Storm Ridge. "Whenever I arrest one, at the risk of my life, and build up an air-tight case—pouf! the gunman goes free, with the help of a packed jury and a friendly judge."

He leaned back in his swivel-chair, crossing a booted leg over his knee, and gave his son a steady look.

"Speakin' of trials," he said, slowly, "why in blazes did you plead guilty to a crime you didn't commit, Clint? Oh, I know the answer. Belle Kellogg. She isn't worth the sacrifice."

Clint Coleman started to his feet, his eyes narrowing, face white and drawn. "Be careful! I won't take——"

"Don't misunderstand me; she's a good girl, I'm sure," the sheriff said quickly. "But what kind of a woman is it who'd let you do what you done, even for her brother? She knew the truth—she must have sensed it the same as I did. But she let you ruin your life just to save a worthless scoundrel. Think it over, son. You were sentenced to five years, and served more'n three, for the sake of a skunk who's now one of Mike Andrus' cheatin' gamblers."

Before Clint could reply to his father's reproaches the street-door opened and Frazer Whitt, the sheriff's deputy, came into the office. He was in his early thirties, handsome in a florid way, and wore his pearl-gray *chaparajos*, green silk shirt, and flat-crowned hat with a well satisfied swagger. Clint had undergone many a run-in with Frazer Whitt when Whitt had been the capable foreman of the Rafter KJ, but those things were forgotten now, and the two shook hands cordially.

Deputy Whitt grinned. "I'd heard you were in town, Clinton. Glad to see you." Then he turned to the sheriff, throwing some

letters onto the desk. "There's the mail, Walt. Something happened to the newspapers, they say. Well, I'll be goin'. Haven't had supper yet. Behave yourself, Clinton," he winked, as he jingled out again.

"Capable man—but ambitious," Walt Coleman said. "He'd like to be sheriff, and prob'ly will be when I'm through. "What's your plans, son? Need money, don't you?" he smiled, reaching for his wallet.

"No, I can make out, Dad," Clint said, throwing his lean left leg over a corner of the sheriff's desk and reaching out, with apparent carelessness, for the little pile of letters that Frazer Whitt had brought. "I'd like to have my range clothes and stuff. That's all.'

WALTER COLEMAN studied his son's face.

"Belle Kellogg told me that your room at the Rafter is just the same as you left it," the sheriff told him. "She's locked it up against the time when you'd be free, and all your gear is still there."

"That was thoughtful of her—Belle is true-blue," Clint mused. "I'll ride out there tomorrow." From the little pile of mail he had selected a long, official envelope which bore in the upper lefthand corner: *Warden's Office, New Mexico Territorial Penitentiary.* "Here's a letter for you, Dad, from my old ramrod. For a favor, would you mind keepin' it a few days before you open it?"

"I savvy how you feel, and of course I won't read it until you say the word," the sheriff said kindly, taking the envelope and dropping it into a drawer. "I've always thought the authorities overdid the business of ridin' herd on a man who's served his time. Well, are you leavin', Clint?" he asked, rising and extending his hand.

"Yes. I'm turnin' in early. It was a long *jornada,* and I'm hankerin' for a real bed. See you tomorrow. Until then, *buenas noches.*"

On his way out he nearly collided with a man who was coming in. It was the taciturn old hombre who had shared the Concord with him on the last day of the ride, the mysterious John Duffy. He didn't speak to Clint, but his eagle eyes gleamed recognition, and he smiled sardonically as he passed.

Slowing his step, Clint lingered a little while, closing the door just as the old man introduced himself to his father in words that sent a chill tingling through his heart:

"Sheriff Walter Coleman? Well, I'm John Duffy, United States Marshal."

CHAPTER III

Buzzards at the Rafter

ALLOWING himself the luxury of a solid twelve-hour sleep, Clint Coleman ate breakfast at nine o'clock the next morning, feeling like a bear coming out of hibernation.

The town was quiet, with few on the streets. Already the sun was a white blaze in the cloudless sky, and Coleman had a long ride before him. The first thing, of course, was to get a saddle-horse, so he crossed over to the Bonanza Livery Barn and hunted up the proprietor.

It proved to be Bill Hooton, a disreputable, squint-eyed old reprobate who had once worked for Jay Edgerton and who, in all likelihood, still did. Edgerton probably controlled the Bonanza, as he did almost every other business in Storm Ridge.

"I cain't let you have a bronc, Coleman," Hooton said bluntly.

Clint, who was walking down the long row of stalls to make a selection, came striding back, his eyes like chipped flint, has jaw outthrust.

"You have 'em for rent here, don't you?"

Hooton edged toward the ten-gauge shotgun that hung on convenient pegs just inside the wide stable doors.

"To respons'ble people, yep, I rent hosses. But from you, meanin' no 'special offense, I'd have to have a deposit to cover full value of the cayuse. With saddle and bridle, one hundred-seventy-five dollars. Got it?"

"He don't need it, Hooton," a new voice broke in, and a sallow, red-haired man came limping through the stable driveway. "Saddle up my horse for Clint Coleman, and hurry up about it!"

Bill Hooton shrugged, muttered something, and went to carry out instructions. The new comer came toward Coleman, both hands open and extended.

"Clint, old friend! Why haven't you looked me up?"

"Hello, Kellogg," Coleman said frostily. He cut the handshake short, for he had never cared much for Belle's brother, and he thought considerably less of him now. He'd

been sorry for him ever since the wild steer had smashed his leg, years before. That had ruined Cliff Kellogg for range work, and he'd become the local express agent. But being sorry didn't mean liking a man; there had to be respect for that.

Cliff was a thief, and he'd kept his mouth shut when young Coleman, who had worked for him, had confessed to stealing the money package. He'd done it for Belle, not Cliff; didn't the bobbing, smiling blackguard realize that? Wouldn't the man stop pawing him? Maybe a good punch on the jaw—but he was a cripple, and besides, he was possibly sincere about it.

"I never got to tell you how much I appreciate—how much I thank you, Clint," Kellogg stammered, actually at the verge of tears. Whisky had made the man maudlin, Coleman decided.

There were evidences of alcoholic deterioration in the gambler's once-handsome face. It was bloated, and a network of purplish veins stood out against the yellowish skin. His eyes were bloodshot, and when he spoke the tremor of his lips was very noticeable.

Coleman was disgusted with the man—and with himself. While in prison he had comforted himself with the hope that Belle's older brother would reform. It had been a foolish sacrifice.

"I'll have your horse back by evenin', Kellogg," Coleman said, finally deciding to accept the offer. But nothing more—ever.

KELLOGG spoke with difficulty. "Friend, if you need anything in the way of money—well, if there's anything else I can do, just come to me." Kellogg faltered, breaking off when he saw the hostility in Coleman's eyes. "I've been looking for you all morning. I wanted to warn you against Mike Andrus. He's on a rampage, and lookin' for you. Threatens to shoot you on sight, and he'll do it, too. Haven't you a hawgleg, Clint? Here, take mine." He began fumbling at his silver belt-buckle, but Coleman stopped him.

"I can take care of myself, thanks. Hooton has that cayuse ready now, so I'll have to be high-tailin', Kellogg." Coleman swung lightly aboard the slender-legged sorrel that the liveryman had led into the driveway.

Out in the street, he pulled up again, finding it necessary to lengthen the stirrups on Cliff's expensive saddle. One of them had been adjusted three inches higher than the other to accommodate the gambler's shortened leg. While he was fixing it Kellogg came up again.

"You know anything about the old hombre that came in on the stage with you last night?" he whispered.

"What about him?"

"He must be a gover'ment investigator of some kind—I think he's after Edgerton," Kellogg said excitedly. "The stranger's been at the court-house since daylight, going through the records looking for land fraud evidence, and Blackstone Smith is scared loco."

Coleman took a deep breath, as if a heavy load had been taken from his shoulders.

"Well, that concerns your crowd, not me," he said, in a better humor as he remounted. When he rode off, Kellogg was protesting that, while it was true that he had "connections" with Jay Edgerton and Andrus, he would always be Clint's best friend.

Coleman increased his speed, and the gambler's voice died out behind him. He was glad to hear the last of it. Interesting, though, what he'd said about U.S. Marshal Duffy. That explained why he hadn't seen Duffy that morning—the officer was after big game. No small fry.

When he swung out on the yucca-bordered trail west of Storm Ridge he found himself thinking of Theresa Thatcher. He hadn't seen *her* again, either. He'd have to make good his word to her: find respectable work for her, or see that she returned home in safety. But now he had Belle to think about. Smiling a little, he pushed the sorrel into a pace that was soon steadily devouring the dusty wagon-road.

The last seven miles led Clint Coleman through a broken country of well-remembered beauty, a land of jagged, rocky towers, cedar-covered slopes, and little parks and valleys where oak and walnut groves splashed the landscape with vivid green. On many a lonely prison night he had shut his eyes to dream of this New Mexican paradise, and now he found the reality lovelier than the vision. A little farther on he saw the tops of the huge cottonwoods that marked the old headquarters of what had once been his old home, then the house itself, a rambling, two-story structure with long galleries on two sides. On the hill beyond it was the grave of the mother who had died when Clint was a child.

He turned into the grass-grown side road,

and was about to enter the wide, deeply shaded yard when the sight of a trio of men on horseback caused him to pull up short.

The riders were sitting their saddles, waiting near the long porch, smoking and talking. Coleman recognized one of them as Slim Jim Cannon, unmistakable because of his height of six feet seven. He was one of Jay Edgerton's crack gunmen, probably the most feared of them all.

COLEMAN thought for a minute, his jaw hardening; then he turned to the left, and made a slow circle until he was within a dozen yards of the group, hidden from them by a thick hedge and the end of the toolhouse. He now saw that Cannon's companions were Seth Crawford and Nesswilder.

They seemed to be expecting somebody to come from the house, and Crawford was holding a handsome black horse which was saddled with one of the most ornate silver-mounted hulls that Coleman had ever cast an eye upon. Even before the door opened, he knew that the gunmen were awaiting their employer, Jay Edgerton.

Coleman had been watching for less than a minute when Edgerton came out. And he wasn't alone. Heedless of the consequences, Coleman jumped from his horse and strode into the open. For it was Belle Kellogg who had accompanied Edgerton out on the gallery, and she had permitted the man to take her in his arms.

"Good-by, Belle," Jay was saying, as he kissed her possessively. "Until next week, then!"

Coleman was conscious of a bitter taste in his mouth, and he saw everything through a red haze as he pressed forward like a drunken man. The three Edgerton men spotted him. They stared in surprise, then broke out in guffaws of laughter.

Jay paused in the act of coming down the steps, his hand moving toward his gun. He was a dark-complexioned man just short of forty, beginning to get heavy at the middle, but with forceful features and bold, insolent eyes. A big diamond glittered noticeably on his hand as he allowed it to fall away from the butt of his Colt.

He had measured Coleman with a contemptuous glance, and he now walked deliberately to his horse, and mounted. Jay's smile broadened as he said banteringly:

"Afraid you're a little late, Coleman. A whole lot too late, I might say. Well, boys, he told his grinning henchmen, "let's ride."

With his hands opening and closing in futile rage, Coleman watched them go, feeling like an idiot, knowing that he looked like one, and not caring. He turned slowly. Belle had vanished from the porch, but the door was still open. He climbed the steps, breathing hard—as if ascending a mountain.

That came from trusting women!

Well, maybe not that. There were good women in the world. That grave on the hillside was an eloquent monument to a good woman! But why was he always falling for the other kind?

CHAPTER IV
Hell Boils Over

IT WAS Belle's mother, not Belle, who met Clint Coleman at the door. The father and the hired punchers were out on the range, of course, at that time of day, but Coleman's rage extended to white-haired Mrs. Kellogg—she had permitted what had just happened, hadn't she? And she didn't seem disturbed by it.

Now she was surveying him through her gold-rimmed spectacles. Disapprovingly, as he could well see. Mrs. Kellogg didn't dream that he had gone to prison for her son's crime—only Belle, and Cliff himself, knew about that crazy sacrifice.

The old lady was expert at meaningless small talk. She was glad, she said, that Clint was home again, and she hoped he'd learned his lesson. He was a kind of prodigal son, wasn't he? And had the "dear sheriff" forgiven him and killed the fatted calf?

Coleman couldn't take much of it. "I've come for some of my clothes and gear, ma'am," he told her brusquely. He brushed past her, just in time to see Belle Kellogg coming in from another room with a key in her hand.

"I'm sorry, Clint. But now—you know." She had been crying, and there were traces of tears on her whitened face.

Coleman found himself staring at her as if he had never really seen her before. Somehow, she wasn't quite as he'd remembered. She was pretty enough to take any man's breath, but in spite of eyes that were as blue as turquoise, and her hair of rippling, sunlit gold, Belle's beauty left him cool, al-

most indifferent.

He was astonished at himself—and immensely relieved. He knew now that his feeling for this girl had been only an infatuation. And he was cured of it. It was wounded pride that had stirred his fury against Edgerton. He took the key from her in silence, and ascended the stairs.

The furnishings of the rest of the house had been changed, but he found his room just as he had left it, some forty-odd months ago. It had been cleaned at regular intervals, probably, for there was no sign of dust, and his favorite Currier & Ives pictures still made a bright clutter on the walls.

The closet was filled with his belongings; he chose a good flannel shirt, his best *chaparajos*, clean denims, and his most comfortable boots, and put them on to replace the rags he'd been wearing. He had bathed and shaved that morning, but he hadn't felt right.

Queer what a decent outfit could do for a man. His gun-belt, the loops still half-filled with plump .45 cartridges, was a little stiff and dry, and he softened it and the holster with an application of neatsfoot oil. The mechanism of his gun was in perfect shape, except that the shells had corroded slightly in the cylinder. He punched these out and slid fresh ones through the loading-gate. Then he gathered up some odds and ends of clothing and stuffed them into his canvas war-bag.

Belle met him in the upstairs hall on his way out.

"I've treated you terribly, Clint, I know," she whispered. "But please try to understand. I'm going to marry Mr. Edgerton, but it's to save the folks from being thrown off the ranch. Father and mother are too old to make a fresh start, and it was the only way."

"You'll never find happiness for them that way, or for yourself," Coleman said, calmly. He could talk to her now like a brother. "You don't love Jay Edgerton, do you? I thought not," he drawled, seeing the answer in her eyes. "You've one big fault, Belle—a generous one, but still a fault—you've been willing to give up everything for the sake of your family. You made me the dupe once, and now you're making one of yourself. But if I can, I'll save you from it. Good-by."

DOWNSTAIRS he bowed at Mrs. Kellogg, gave her a cool "adios," and settled his own ten-gallon hat firmly on his head. Without looking back, he strode out to the waiting sorrel and secured his gear behind the saddle. Then he rode out of the yard and along the side road until he reached the main trail.

It was curious, but he was not at all downcast now. He felt lighter, and more free. Old Walt Coleman had surely called the turn. For the first time in years he could see things, as his father did, in the white light of reason.

Although he had come to his senses about Belle, he felt an increasing hostility against Jay Edgerton and all his crowd.

Jay wasn't content with enriching himself with lands and material things at the expense of the poor and the weak; he was using his power to destroy the heart and soul of a woman whose shoes he was not fit to blacken. Coleman had been angry before, but now his fury took on the cold edge of whetted steel.

Halfway back to town he found himself wondering if his stretch in prison had dimmed his shooting eye or stiffened his trigger-finger. He'd been pretty good, once. Before he was sixteen years old he had been able to shoot rings around Frazer Whitt, who was then his father's foreman. Whitt hadn't liked it.

Coleman grinned at the recollection, and then, spotting the whitened skull of a steer mouldering some fifty yards off the trail, he whipped his Colt from its holster and took a quick shot without slackening the speed of his mount. It was a miss. A geyser of gravel spurted upward a foot or so from the target as the slug went ricocheting across the flats. But Coleman's next two shots, coming in one blended roar, smashed the bony relic to flinders. He rode on, whistling softly.

It was almost dark when he turned in at the Bonanza Livery at Storm Ridge and unsaddled the borrowed sorrel. Not trusting the surly Bill Hooton overmuch, he cared for the horse himself, putting him in a clean stall and seeing that he had a rub-down, feed and water.

He was almost envious of Cliff Kellogg. The animal was an imported, high-priced one; only a gambler could afford to own a horse like that. He demanded a written receipt for the sorrel's return. And got it. Hooton hastened to scrawl one out, eying Coleman with more respect than in the morning, which went to show what clothes could

do for an hombre. And a gun!

After a bite of supper he sauntered through the dusk toward the San Antonio Hotel. Later he would drop in at his father's office, for he was curious about the doings of U. S. Marshal Duffy. The clerk, Sam Mills, was dozing at his desk in the lobby when Coleman entered with his war-bag. A gentle nudge in the ribs caused the old man to leap from his chair and claw toward the ceiling.

"Don't—do that! Oh, it's you, Clint," Mills gasped. "I thought I was bein' poked with a hawgleg. In this loco town a feller never knows. Say, did you know that Judge Blackstone Smith has been arrested and locked up in jail? That hombre Duffy swore out charges against him—he's a gover'ment marshal. They say that other heads is liable to fall. Duffy's in his room upstairs right now, goin' through a mess of papers he took from the court-house."

It was interesting news, and for a few minutes the two talked it over. Then Coleman asked, "How's the girl—Miss Thatcher—getting along? I sort of promised myself that I'd keep an eye on her."

"You're jist wastin' your time, Sir Gallyhad," Mills cackled. "She's gone. She's at the Antlers."

COLEMAN'S eyes narrowed to icy slits. "Did that snake of a Mike Andrus—"

"Oh, now. Mike didn't come for her," the clerk informed him. "The gal went this mornin' of her own free will, without no suggestions from anybody. Took her suitcase. Where you goin', Clint?"

Coleman had thrown his war-bag behind the hotel desk. "Before I'll believe she's of that breed," he rasped, "I've got to see it myself. Take care of the sack, Sam, until I get back—if I do."

Outwardly calm, he walked out of the San Antonio into the dark street. As he did so, he passed a group of three men who were holding a palaver at the corner of the building near the hitch-rack. One of them was Deputy Sheriff Whitt, but it wasn't light enough for him to recognize the others. Whitt spoke to Coleman, but Coleman strode on past, too preoccupied for pleasantries.

Halfway across the street, he stopped in his tracks and for a moment tried to analyze his feelings. Theresa was nothing to him, so why all this ruckus in his brain?

He laughed shortly, then strode on faster than ever. A man didn't have to have a reason to make a jackass out of himself. He should be familiar enough with the process by this time, he decided wryly. Would he never learn? Maybe that answer would be written in gun-smoke.

There were two entrances to the notorious whirlpool known as The Antlers, and Coleman strode past the one on Main Street and pushed through the bat-wing doors at the side.

He found himself in a huge room with a balcony above two sides of it, and a horseshoe-shaped bar downstairs. It had been remodeled and enlarged since he'd last seen it, and he liked the look of the place less than ever.

In the center was a small dance floor, where a Mexican girl was now singing a popular song of the day, accompanied by a fiddler and a pianist. Other entertainers were awaiting their turns, some on the balcony and others down at the bar, which was well patronized for that early hour.

Coleman's glance swept the room, passing from face to face but not finding the one it sought. A little relieved, he pushed up to the bar and gave his order. One of the three bartenders put an empty glass and a quart whisky bottle in front of him.

"Evening, Mr. Coleman," he said.

"Is Andrus here?" Clint asked quietly.

"In the office off the balcony, I think. No, come to think of it, I saw him leave about a quarter of an hour ago." The fat barkeeper counted out his customer's change. "Left with Mr. Nesswilder, I believe. Any message?" The man's voice was bland, but behind his masklike features Coleman sensed a veiled hostility.

"No message that I wouldn't rather deliver personally," he drawled. With the whisky glass in his hand he turned to watch the crowd, leaning his back against the bar and hooking one heel on the brass foot-rail.

Along each side of the dance floor were ranged the gambling tables: two faro layouts, a couple of roulette wheels, chuck-a-luck, blackjack, and poker. Only a few of the games were operating, and Cliff Kellogg was walking back and forth among them, waiting for the crowd to gather.

As soon as he saw Coleman he came hurrying over, bobbing and smiling in a pathetic attempt to show his devotion. Coleman declined his offer of drinks. He was still toying with a half-filled glass, enjoying the taste of the slowly sipped whisky, but hav-

ing too much respect for its power to overdo it at a time like this.

KELLOGG showed evidence of having taken too many. His eyes were dilated and glassy.

"I left your bronc at Hooton's," Coleman said. "There's something I want to know, Cliff. Was a new entertainer hired today? A rather small girl, dark hair and eyes?"

"Yes," Kellogg said. "Her name's Theresa. Seems a nice kid. Maybe too nice for—"

"Where is she?" Coleman demanded harshly.

"I haven't seen her since supper." Kellogg shrugged. "Say, Clint, you hadn't better hang around here—not alone, anyhow. What I told you about Andrus still goes. He's dangerous. And there's others that don't like you. Jay and his bunch are in town. Confidentially, something is up. I don't know what's in the wind, but something is, that's dead sure."

Coleman didn't reply, for he had just then spotted Theresa Thatcher. She had just hurried in through the front entrance, and she seemed nervous and excited. He was about to start toward her when she saw him and came running to where he stood at one end of the curved bar. She was wearing a red-trimmed cloak over a low-cut ball gown, and he noticed that her cheeks bore a slight touch of rouge. In spite of it the girl's face was deathly pale.

"Howdy," Coleman said darkly. "Shall I buy you a drink? Isn't that your system?"

She caught him by the arm, and he could feel the trembling of her fingers through his shirt. "Clint, you must go—quickly!" she whispered. "Your life depends on it. Get a horse and ride. Leave town!"

Coleman finished his whisky, holding the last burning drops on his tongue for a moment. He wanted to say something cruel and devastating, but Theresa's long-lashed eyes were too full of pleading and pain.

Glancing down at his hand, he saw that he had unconsciously gripped the liquor glass so fiercely that it had broken between his thumb and fingers. He was still looking at it when he felt a hand laid upon his shoulder from behind. He whirled, the glass fragments tinkling to the floor as his hand flew instinctively toward his holstered Colt.

"It's only me, son," came a familiar voice, and Clint saw that it was his father.

The sheriff's gray mane was more tousled than ever, and Clint had never seen him more strained and anxious. Deputy Whitt was with him, standing directly behind him.

"You'll have to come with us, son," the sheriff muttered, his lips close to Clint's ear. "I'm arrestin' you—for your own protection. The hotel clerk has been shot to death, and the U. S. marshal's murdered in his room. You're being accused of the killin's, and there's a mob outside formin' fast. They've got a hangrope for you."

CHAPTER V
Gunfire and Brimstone

CLINT COLEMAN'S first feeling was one of horror and bewilderment. He had been in the Antlers less than half an hour; during that time old Sam Mills and Marshal Duffy had been brutally slain, and already a lynching party was gathering, looking for a neck to stretch *his* neck.

Even then the news was sweeping through the Antlers, for the music had stopped, and men were scurrying this way and that. Yells and loud voices could be heard in the streets outside, blending into an ominous roar. Coleman sensed that somehow all this had been prearranged; it was the final act of an evil stage-play that had been written out beforehand.

When Deputy Whitt suggested that he hand over his gun, Clint complied with a moment of hesitation. He'd seen mobs in action before, and knew their fury. His only chance seemed to be in reaching the jail at the courthouse and allowing himself to be locked in. Even then, he'd be in danger until the real murderers were discovered.

As he hurried toward the side door with his father and deputy Whitt, he looked back at Theresa. What he saw in her tragic dark eyes suddenly convinced him that his life would be worth fighting for. What her anguished glance promised he would go through hell itself to attain.

Frazer Whitt led the way, bearing Clint's gun, his own weapon still holstered; the sheriff was right behind, holding the "prisoner's" arm with one hand, and grasping his long-barrel Peacemaker in the other. It would be necessary to cross the main drag in order to reach the jail, and this might

prove to be impossible.

A big pile of empty crates and boxes had been lighted in the middle of the street, and its rising flames threw a lurid glare over half the town. Men were swarming from everywhere, gathering in a seething maelstrom in front of the Antlers. The sheriff's party was sighted almost immediately, and hoarse shouts went up: "There he is! Head 'em off!" and "Get the rope, boys! Take him alive!"

Clint knew many of the mobsters; most were citizens of Storm Ridge who had simply been carried away by the excitement, and who probably bore him no grudge. The ringleaders, though, were members of the Jay Edgerton set-up. Clint saw Seth Crawford and Nesswilder, and coming from the opposite direction, with a group of screeching bar-flies and drunks, was Slim Jim Cannon, head and shoulders above most of the rest. A few of the crowd were on horseback, but the majority were afoot, and many of these were armed only with improvised clubs.

"We can't get through to the jail, Walt!" cried Whitt. "Only thing we can do is make a stand! We're bein' headed off."

The sheriff objected. He wanted to try a break-through across a field, but the deputy was unwilling to chance it, and they ran toward an empty warehouse that stood on the corner diagonally opposite the Antlers.

Clint thought this move ill-advised, to say the least, for the heavy doors were locked, and there was no way of escape back through the building to the alley. The only thing they could do now was to put their backs to the wall and fight off the mob.

In a moment they were hemmed in on three sides by the yelling multitude. Someone threw a bottle, and it crashed to bits against the warehouse just above their heads.

Held waist-high, the sheriff's gun was swinging slowly from side to side, as if on a pivot, and the crowd's rush was checked at his defiant shout:

"Stand back, you bunch of sheep, or I start blastin'!"

CLINT was proud of his father then, prouder than he'd ever been. Like a cornered lion holding at bay a pack of snarling dogs, he scorned them all.

"You're not goin' to hang anyone without a fair trial!" the sheriff told them. "I'm not speakin' to you as a father; I'm speakin' as an officer of the law. Break it up, now! Disperse! If you were men, you'd be ashamed to be a part of this crazy mob! Don't be led like a bunch of woolies!"

The sheriff's ringing words carried the impact of physical blows, and the crowd hesitated, shrinking back a little. The lynchers could have rushed in and finished the Colemans in quick order, but Old Walt meant business, and they knew that some of them were liable to taste hot lead in the process.

Nobody was very eager to be the first to close in with that determinedly wagging six-shooter. Slim Jim Cannon's yell of: "You got 'em cornered, men! Rush 'em!" produced no stampede forward.

It was the psychological moment, Clint thought, for the three of them to make a flank movement to the corner and a dash for the jail.

It was in that critical minute that Deputy Frazer Whitt played *his* hand. Suspicion had begun to dawn in Clint's mind, but he wasn't prepared for the brazen treachery of the man his father had trusted through the years; and when Whitt left them to harangue the crowd from the top of an overturned packing-case, he could hardly believe his ears.

"Men, I'm givin' in to you," he shouted. "I'd fight you to the last ditch if there was a chance of young Coleman's innocence, but he's guilty! Hold on, and listen," he went on, as a roar went up, "I'll tell you why I know. You've heard already that he was seen comin' from the hotel at about the time the crime was committed; I saw him, myself. But you don't savvy the motive yet—here it is!" It was almost as bright as day now from the flames of the bonfire, and all could see that Whitt was flourishing a letter.

"This is from the Warden of the Territorial pen!" he ranted. "You thought Clint—the confessed thief—was out on parole, or had his sentence cut, didn't you? The fact is, Clint escaped!"

When the deputy produced the document, Sheriff Coleman's beefy face had whitened with rage at the proof of Whitt's duplicity in stealing and opening the letter, but when he heard its contents he turned to stare at his son. In his eyes was questioning bewilderment.

"It's true, dad," Clint whispered. "I just had to get home—to attend to things." And he knew that his father understood, although there was no time then for further explanations. Whitt was still hammering at the

crowd, which had grown silent but even more menacing.

"The U. S. Marshal was here to nab Clint Coleman. He knew about the escape, because when we found his body we found a folded-up Santa Fe newspaper in his room—one of 'em that never did reach this town, thanks to Clint's schemin'. But the marshal had a copy all the time, the paper that told about the escape! That's why Clint murdered him! And on the way in or out of the hotel, he killed Sam Mills!"

It hardly held water, Clint thought. If Marshal Duffy had been after the escaped convict, why hadn't he taken him prisoner immediately, on the stagecoach? Clint didn't doubt that he'd had the newspaper in question—he'd felt all the time that Duffy knew about him—but the old man with the eagle eyes had been after far bigger quarry.

IF WHITT'S charges carried no weight for reasonable men, they certainly infuriated the "vigilantes." Bill Hooton, the liveryman; and the squatty town blacksmith, Clark, were carrying the already knotted hangrope, and they were in the forefront of a tide of men that now poised itself for the final engulfing rush.

But, just as the horseshoe of frenzied lynchers had begun to contract upon the two Colemans, Cliff Kellogg came bursting through the seething mass, his screams rising above the babble:

"Clint didn't do those killings! Stop, boys! He didn't do it! I know who did!"

The gambler was exalted with drink—and probably with something more than whisky. His face was like a mask of ivory, but his eyes glittered with an almost insane light. Both his closed fists were raised above his head in wild defiance. He was turning to face the crowd when the inevitable happened—the flash and roar of a gun, and Kellogg crumpled and fell, striking the sidewalk almost at the feet of the Colemans.

The shot had come from Clint's gun—the gun now in the hand of Deputy Whitt, who from his perch on the packing-case had sent a bullet angling downward through the gambler's neck and body.

"Frazer, drop it!" roared Walt Coleman, his voice breaking the hypnotic silence that had followed the death-blast. "You're under arrest."

Then his own gun belched flame and smoke as the deputy made a vicious effort to line his sights on his old employer. Walt had fired from the level of his waist, apparently without taking aim, but he didn't miss.

Frazer Whitt, his handsome face twisted and distorted now with agony, teetered crazily for a long moment, then went plunging down into the crowd. Clint hadn't waited to see him drop—he knew he would when Walt had triggered—and already he was on one knee beside the dying Kellogg.

"Stand back, all of you! He's trying to say something—give him air."

The gambler had turned on his side and was breathing in long, difficult gasps. Clint took his head in his lap, and wiped the reddened froth from the man's lips with his bandanna.

He couldn't forget that this ruin of a man had been Belle's brother. No matter now what he had been; he had redeemed himself in the manner of his dying. And he was to make his atonement more complete still. His words, when they came, were faint and broken, but many in the awed crowd heard his testimony.

"One of the killers—was Whitt—he proved it, didn't he? Don't know who was with him, but it was—Edgerton who sent them. Heard him and Andrus talkin'—Duffy had courthouse papers in his room, incriminating—whole gang. I wasn't really in on this mess, but plenty—plenty others. You there, Clint?" he panted, not realizing that it was young Coleman who was supporting his head and shoulders. "Listen, everybody—it was I and not Clint—guilty express stealin' years back. Proof in books and papers—my trunk. Clint, you there?" he whispered again. "All black now. Don't let—that skunk harm—Belle—"

Clint gently eased Kellogg's head to the sidewalk, for the breathing had stopped with the last word, and did not begin again. Nobody molested him when he strode to where Deputy Whitt lay huddled. There was no interference when he picked up the still warm six-shooter. The mood of the crowd had changed, and the Colemans didn't intend to allow it to turn again—there was much still to do.

"Slim Jim Cannon, you're under arrest for incitin' a riot!" Old Walt roared. "You, too, Nesswilder!" And then, as voices began to rise: "Citizens of Storm Ridge! I'm deputizing every decent man of you! You all know something of what's been goin' on in this county and now's the time you can stand up

like men and end it! Clint and I are goin' callin' at the Antlers. We won't need any help there. Not any. But we want the support of all honest folks in backin' up what we're goin' to have to do. Do we get that support?"

"By gorries, Walt, we're behind you!" the blacksmith whooped. "Grab Slim Jim, boys! And Seth Crawford! Don't let 'em git away! We'll have a use yet for this hangnoose."

"Throw it on that bonfire," the sheriff commanded. "You hear me? There'll be no illegal hangings, not of anyone. There's law in Storm Ridge, and it's settlin' down to work, pronto!"

CHAPTER VI

Smoky Housecleaning

OUT of the Edgerton henchmen, only Nesswilder had been disarmed and captured by the crowd. Slim Jim and Seth Crawford succeeded in fighting their way back into the Antlers.

The very numbers of the "posse," many of whom were unarmed, was a disadvantage. Nesswilder, in charge of several deputized men, was sent to the jail to join the lawyer, Blackstone Smith. Bill Hooton, the livery-barn owner, was taken along with him, for the sheriff was determined to make a clean sweep.

Shots were beginning to come from the Jay Edgerton stronghold now, and Walt gave orders to kick out the fire. He insisted, too, that the townsmen scatter and keep to cover.

"Clint and I are goin' in," he said crisply. "If we don't come out, inside of twenty minutes, go to your homes or places of business and prepare to defend them. Because if Edgerton wins this trick, he'll stop at nothin'."

"Let us help," the blacksmith begged. "It'll be suicide, for jist the two of you. We could set the Antlers afire, and smoke out them rats!"

Clint whitened. Theresa was in that building—unless she'd made her escape during the excitement, and the thought of the risks she would run, even at best, was like the thrust of a bowie-knife.

"There'll be smoke enough," he promised grimly. "You can help best, Clark, by keeping out of this. Let's go, Dad."

"'*Sta bueno*," Walt growled. Nothing more was said until they had made it to the blind front corner of the Antlers, where they paused for a last brief consultation. There was no handshake between them, nothing dramatic; the idea of separating to rush the two entrances simultaneously was considered, but dismissed because of the likelihood of their being caught in their own crossfire.

They decided to go in through the side door, with the sheriff covering the horseshoe bar and the downstairs in general, while Clint paid special attention to the stairs and balcony above. They were not "going in a-shooting," there were the entertainers and possibly other innocent people to consider, and the guilty would have every chance to submit peacefully.

Clint admitted to his father that there was one person in the resort in whom he was especially interested in protecting, and old Walt, who had lost his hat somewhere, shook his gray mane in silent laughter.

"Gosh, Clint, won't you never learn?" he chuckled.

"It's taken me a long time, but I *have* learned. And if anything happens to me," Clint said, "take care of Theresa. Well, what's keepin' us?"

Keeping close to the wall of the building, they walked to the side entrance of the Antlers, shoulder to shoulder, crouched a little and taking long, quick strides that brought them to the swing-doors together. Turning sharply, guns drawn, they plunged through.

All the while it was happening, a part of Clint's mind seemed to stand aside from the rest of it and watch everything in a sort of calm wonderment. Funny about a deal like this, how time itself seemed to stand still, as if eternity had frozen past and future together in an everlasting present—maybe it was like being drugged. In a spot like this an hombre felt neither fear nor anger; there was room for nothing but synchronized action of muscle and nerve.

He heard his father call out: "Don't anybody move!" and then all was blotted out in an inferno of gunfire and concussions that set the building trembling underfoot.

Out of the side of his eye, as he charged past it, he saw the curved bar and two cowering bartenders behind it, both plastered as close to the floor as they could press themselves. There was another hombre there,

too, but he didn't count now.

Seth Crawford had taken a shot at Walt Coleman, had been too slow about it, and he was now swaying blindly in the smoke of his own gun. There was a blot of scarlet on his shirt, and the mirror behind him was pocked by a bullet-hole from which lines of broken glass radiated in rainbow prisms.

Clint sensed all this rather than saw it, for his chore was with the hombres in the other part of the house, and from the first jump he had plenty to keep him busy. Before he had taken three steps, he felt himself whirled half around as a slug nailed him high in the left shoulder. It was a heavy shock, like a blow of a club. He staggered, but kept his feet, and his own hogleg flashed and thundered in reply.

Several must have been shooting at him, for bullets seemed to be fanning the air all around him, but at first he saw only Slim Jim, the crack gunman of all Edgerton's crew, standing in the center of the dance-floor and looking as tall as a windmill.

At Clint's first shot the monster went to his hands and knees, coughing, and wagging his long head stupidly from side to side. When Clint leaped over the wilting body, headed for the stairs—the focus now of all the fire and gunsmoke—he saw a gambler he didn't know go scooting behind an overturned card table.

The man could have dropped Clint, who hadn't noticed him, but the fellow had seen enough, and his mouth was moving in gun-drowned yells of "Don't shoot!"

Mike Andrus was halfway down the open stairway, one hand on the bannister, a flame-spewing six-shooter in the other, as Clint Coleman started up. Above Mike, on the landing, was the heavy-featured Jay Edgerton, and it came to Clint—the thought taking form in that remote part of his brain that had remained calm, and detached from all the violence—that these two were the last, the only barriers that still stood between him and Theresa.

Clint smiled as he triggered, at the same time twisting himself to one side. He felt the scorching gust of Mike's last shot, then dodged again so that the gunman's toppling body would tumble past him. Edgerton was alone now, and he was next. Clint's Colt barrel, streaming smoke, tipped upward for the kill.

"Enough—you crazy devil—I'm through!" screeched the one-time boss of Storm Ridge. He opened his hands, holding them shoulder high in token of submission, and his silver-mounted revolver clattered on the stairs. "You blasted Colemans!" Edgerton's eyes were insane lights in a mask of puffy, yellow clay.

Clint made a mistake, then, and it could have been fatal.

His glance automatically left Edgerton for an instant to follow the dropped six-shooter, and as quick as the striking of a rattlesnake Edgerton's right hand streaked toward the small hide-out gun that was concealed in a shoulder holster beneath his vest.

Clint might not have seen the treacherous gesture at all had not the diamond on Edgerton's finger flashed in the smoky lamplight.

Clint whipped his gun in line and fired; once again he yanked the trigger, but his weapon was empty; he remembered that Deputy Whitt had used one of the shells on Kellogg, and he'd forgotten to replace it.

But there was no need for more shooting. The Storm Ridge despot was dying like a crushed spider; his twitching body was spraddled on the top steps, head downward, arms outflung.

"I'm kind of glad you tried that, Jay," Clint Coleman panted. "Belle is free of you now. For keeps."

FOR a moment he teetered dizzily. He reached out for the support of the bannister but his left arm had gone so ridiculously numb that it failed to support him. He would have stumbled down the steps if someone hadn't grasped him from below. It was Old Walt.

"You bad hit, son?"

"Just a bit in my shoulder—I'm *bueno* now," Clint growled. "Come on—we've got to find—"

With his father a step behind him, he sprinted up to the balcony, where the half dozen entertainers and another employee or two had been huddled out of reach of the gun-fire. None had been hurt. The Mexican violinist was whimpering, but only because his fiddle had been broken during the wild scramble.

Theresa was safe, and when he saw that, Clint took his first easy breath since the beginning of battle. But he didn't speak to her yet.

Sheriff Coleman had gone into Edgerton's office and private rooms which opened off the balcony, and Clint followed him. All

was in disorder there; on the chairs and floor were heaps of official documents and other tell-tale papers looted from Duffy's hotel room.

Banknotes and gold coins, too, were scattered through the litter, and there were other evidences that Edgerton and his crew had been in panic. A certain Judge Blackstone Smith would need ten years to explain all this away—and he'd probably get that length of time in which to do it—at Santa Fe pen.

Clint returned to the balcony. The news of the law's victory had spread through town on wings, and excited citizens were already pushing through both doors on the floor below.

"Theresa!" Clint called out sharply. "Come here! There's something I want to say—to ask you, I mean."

She had been waiting for him, pale and anxious, and now for the first time she smiled. Then she noted the red-sodden sleeve of his shirt, and her dark eyes widened with distress.

"You'd better get to a doctor, Mr. Coleman."

"Never mind the medico, and don't call me 'Mister,'" he said sternly. "You're not a dance-hall girl, Theresa, and don't pretend you are! What are you doing in this place? I've got a right to know," he went on, doggedly. "Dad has just told me that when Kellogg's papers are found I'll be cleared without having to go back to Santa Fe, so I'm speakin' as if I was already a free man, with the right to—well, the right to ask you to marry me."

There! He'd got it out, and he didn't care how broadly Old Walt was grinning.

"John Duffy was my uncle," Theresa said, with a little catch of her breath. "This is the third case he and I worked on together, undercover. I'm an employee of the U. S. Land Office. You needn't look so shocked, Clint." She smiled, seeing him blink. From the folds of her dress she took a .41 caliber derringer pistol and showed him the twin-barreled little engine of death. "With this, you see, I could have taken care of myself, pretty well."

"Not as well as I could," Clint said. "Not as well as I'm goin' to, from now on. You and your uncle savvied all the time that I'd made a getaway from the pen, didn't you?"

"And I knew right from the first," she told him, "that you had another girl on your mind, too—a woman has ways of recognizing that in a man, Clint. So when you speak of marrying me—"

"I act on it," he finished for her. "Right now I want a preacher more than I need a doctor. Come here! No more undercover jobs for you. You've got one with me, keepin' shanty! As soon as I clear myself legally—" He paused, gulping, losing some of his self-confidence. "That is, if you'd consent to throw in with an ex-jailbird—"

He read the answer then in her upturned face, and he laughed aloud, pulling her to him with his one good arm. And this time, he didn't let her go.

NEXT ISSUE

THE TALKING WIRES

An Exciting Complete Novelet by L. P. HOLMES

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY, neighbors. This is old Tex Brown again, tuning up the old groan box for another session of grass opera under the stars.

Well sir, I reckon it won't come as too much of a surprise to us to learn by way of this song that there was once a cowpoke that wanted him a wife. Now let's take this hombre in this song. I reckon you can take him, because I ain't at all sure that the gals are going to run over each other taking him. But what I mean to say is that I was just thinking about what a modest kind of a hombre he was. He's kind of like the poet said when he wrote, "Man wants but little here below. . . . "

He's a cowboy, and it just happens that the kind of work a cowboy does calls for a certain kind of living. In order to be a cowpoke, you've got to do whatever is necessary to perform your work. And if you don't like your work, then you shore oughtn't to plan to spend your life going around poking cows, because it ain't no picnic at best.

A Cowpoke Never Stays Put!

He says he's tired of being single. Well, a cowboy is away from home just about as much as a traveling man, and his trade ain't one in which his wife can sit on the front porch and watch him practice it. If he was married, she would have to traipse around the hills and plains with him, and that just don't make for a very contented married life.

Also he don't like to take his meals at a campfire; he don't like sleeping out on the ground, he wants to eat off china plates, no less, and he wants a big easy chair to sit in. Otherwise, I take it, he likes cowpunching pretty well.

But like I said, he wants but little here below. He'll be satisfied with almost any kind of gal—so long as she is rich and will buy him a ranch, so long as she is a good cook, and is willing to sweat over a stove while he sets in the shade.

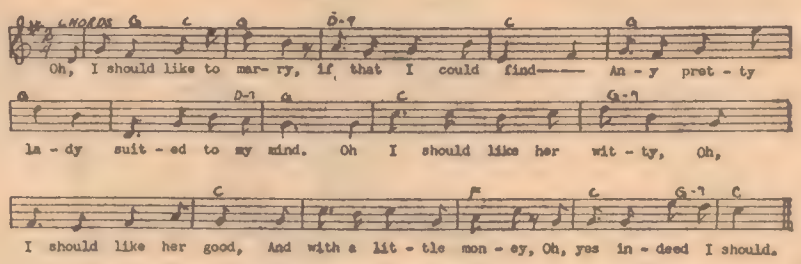
And, being a modest feller, he don't care much what she looks like, so long as her hair is the prettiest he ever saw, and her eyes sparkle like wine, and she always has a beautiful smile and a sweet voice. Boy, he shore don't want much!

Here's What He Has Tuh Offer

Well, now we see what he wants, and we see what he's got to give. He's a big-hearted cuss, and he'll give the girl the privilege of having for a husband a hombre that don't like his work, and wants to sit down in the shade and live off his wife's money and work. And the funny thing is, the hombre don't see anything funny about that. He's so stuck on himself that he's actually going to move on to the next job, still looking for such a gal.

I've often heard folks say what kind of a wife or husband they wanted, and I've very often played a game with myself. Most of those folks want just about all the qualities the ranny in this song wants. And so I'd say to myself, "He wants all that, eh? I wonder if he's ever counted up his own assets which he's got to exchange for all that." Try that sometime, even on yourself. It'll make you more humble, and increase your assets by that much.

I WANT A WIFE



2.

I'm just a roaming cowboy, a-looking for a wife,
I'm tired of being single, it ain't no kind of life.
For when a man is single and always has to roam,
He never has got any time to make himself a home.

3.

I'm tired of drinking from a can out on the open range,
I'm tired of seeing earth and sky with never any change.
I'd like to sleep upon a bed, eat vittles from a plate,
And sit down in a chair instead of on the corral gate.

4.

I want a gal with lots of cash so we can buy some stock,
And have a spread to call my own, and never watch the clock.
And she must learn to bake a pie just like mother made,
While I sit down to take my ease beneath my own cool shade.

5.

Oh, I should like her hair clinging like a vine,
And I want her eyes to be like sparkling Champagne wine.
And let her smile be like the sunset's golden glow.
And let her voice to me be always soft and low.

6.

Where can a waddy find a gal like the one I need,
When money flows away from him and his clothes have gone to seed?
It may be she lives across the next tall verdant hill.
So I had better roam that way. Next week I guess I will.

It seemed to Lucinda Garett as though Tomorrow would never come—but then everything started happening all at once!

Even while staring into the fire, Lucinda saw Julie offer Bill a sandwich

I'll Marry You Manana

By THELMA KNOLES

THE spring breeze was plenty cool along about midnight, and as Lucinda Garett and Bill Harless stepped out of the warmth and brightness of Riley's Steak Palace she snugged her wool jacket tight around her. The wind blew her auburn curls flat against the tilted brim of her cream-colored Stetson, and she was happy and glowing from a warmth that came from deep inside.

As they moved outside the fan of light in front of the restaurant Bill drew her close to his side with a firm arm around her shoulders. Lucinda's breath came fast between her parted lips and her eyes shone like stars. The click of their double footsteps on the boardwalk was a rhythm of happiness and excitement.

She leaned against his arm, thrilling to the strength and warmth of his clasp. This could never have happened back home in Mesquite, she was sure.

"Bill," she said softly, "I never told you, but I've kept track of every rodeo you entered from the time you left Mesquite. The whole two years."

That's how she knew he'd be in Tucsonia this week, she silently added. That was why she was singing cowboy songs at Riley's Steak Palace, so she'd be sure of seeing Bill.

The way that they had met after two years was wonderful. To think of having Bill discover her surrounded by eager cowboys begging for their favorite songs. To be dressed in a gorgeous buckskin jacket and short fringed skirt and a gleaming satin shirt

that set off her auburn hair to perfection. She'd never forget the startled recognition in Bill Harless' face when he saw who it was at the piano in Riley's cafe.

"Lucinda," Bill said, his voice vibrant with that new excitement that she'd noticed in him all evening, "how about headin' back to Mesquite with me in the morning?" He nodded toward the lantern-lit street down which they walked. "Tucsonia's all right, but it's not home."

LUCINDA stopped so suddenly that she stumbled and he put his other arm around her to steady her. Standing in the circle of his arms she searched his face for the teasing expression that must be there. But Bill wasn't teasing. He was dead serious.

"B-but the rodeo starts tomorrow!" she stammered in protest.

"Hang the rodeo," Bill replied. "I've had enough of it. Honest," he confessed with an almost shame-faced grin. "I've been so homesick I could taste it. Two years is a long time to be away from your own folks and home."

"But—but I thought you said you'd never go back long as your dad felt the way he did," Lucinda persisted.

Everyone in Mesquite knew all about how Bill blew up and left to become a rodeo contestant when old J. B. Harless roared that his son was too consarned wild and unbroke to take the Horseshoe beefs on the Denver drive.

"That was last week," Bill explained. His hands closed tight on her shoulders. "I've been waiting all evening till we were alone to tell you, Lucinda. Today I got word from the Horseshoe foreman—you remember old Shorty Fiske—that Dad was thrown from his horse yesterday afternoon."

"Was he hurt bad?" Lucinda asked.

"No," Bill said, "but he'll be laid up for some weeks. That means he can't go on the drive to Denver this year." There was a crackling excitement in Bill's eyes and voice.

A new pang of misery stabbed Lucinda. This, then, was back of the tense excitement she'd sensed in Bill this evening. It had nothing to do with her at all. He'd been thinking of the trail drive.

She said in a small voice, "You'd give up your chance at the world championship now? Throw your rodeo career away to go back to Mesquite—a little cowtown like that?

"Sure," Bill said promptly. "I had all I want of that life. I want to get back to my own folks and the ranch, and"—his voice took on new eagerness—"all my old compadres around the valley."

Yes, thought Lucinda, you want to get back to Julie Broderick for instance. Julie and Bill had ruled the young crowd of Mesquite and the Horseshoe Valley with a high hand since they were knee-high to yearlings, as everyone acknowledged.

Bill swung her around, his arm tight around her shoulders again. "Here, we'd better be moving along."

They walked swiftly and soon reached the darkened Riley house where Lucinda lived. They stepped quietly up onto the porch. Bill drew Lucinda down beside him in the hammock that was strung across a corner shaded by honeysuckle vines.

"Reckon you can be ready to go back with me tomorrow morning, Lucinda?" Bill asked eagerly. "I can't get over it, Lucinda. How everything's worked out. When I walked into Riley's place and saw you there it was like seeing a piece of home itself. You looked like an angel to me, I swear it."

Lucinda stiffened. So that's why he'd been so glad to see her. Just someone from Mesquite. That's why he'd been walking her home every evening with a promise to see her mañana.

His arm tightened around her. "Won't it be great to go back together?"

"I—I can't leave tomorrow, Bill," Lucinda said desperately. "You see, I promised Mame Riley that I'd stay on and play in the evenings at her uncle's restaurant for all of rodeo week. It wouldn't be fair to quit now. He had the piano put in especially for me."

But the real reason Lucinda wouldn't leave was because she was dead certain that going back to Mesquite would mean losing all Bill Harless' new interest in her.

"Well, anyhow," Bill reluctantly gave in, "you'll come back home at the end of the week, sure. That cattle drive has to get under way in two weeks, Lucinda, and then I'll be gone for months."

Bill stood up abruptly, drawing her to him, holding her cold hands tight in his warm grasp. "Adios, Lucinda," he said softly. "I'll be looking for you. Let me know what stage to meet."

Lucinda smiled up at him, her eyes bright, her soft red lips uncontrollably trembling. Bill swooped her close and kissed her. Such a

warm, sure kiss that for a moment all her doubts dissolved in that sweetness and closeness. For that breathless, ecstatic moment with Bill's arms hard around her and his lips on hers, she could believe that this miracle could last—even in Mesquite.

But later, alone in her room, she remembered that other time when she was fifteen years old and Bill had asked her to go buggy riding with him. She remembered sitting in that very same bedroom, watching the lace curtains blow, while she waited and waited for him to come. She'd never forgotten the humiliation and heartbreak of that time, and how he'd finally telephoned to put off the date until mañana instead.

They never did have the buggy ride and it was never referred to again, but Lucinda hadn't forgotten it.

She looked at the picture of her twin brother there on the dresser. Chuck, so arrogant and sure in his smart college clothes! She wished she had some of his assurance and nerve.

She picked up her brush and vigorously polished her red-brown hair until it gleamed like the satiny bark of the manzanitas high in the mountains. Chuck had come home from college at the end of his first year and barged right in with Julie Broderick's crowd. He didn't give a rip if their dear, hardworking old father was only the livery stable owner. Chuck made himself a welcome guest at all the parties Julie gave, and Julie seemed crazy about him. But Julie Broderick didn't include Lucinda in her little parties for her Eastern boarding-school friends.

And all that didn't matter the twist of a wild bronc's tail excepting that Bill Harless was in Julie's crowd. When Bill stampeded off to ride the rodeo circuit Lucinda lost all interest in Mesquite society. She'd been glad to get a job in Tusconia. . . .

THE closer the stagecoach got to Mesquite a week later, the more Lucinda shrank into herself. Before she was aware of the fact, the coach clattered to a stop in front of the old hotel on Main Street.

Bill was there with Julie hanging on his arm and her usual crowd around her. Lucinda saw them before she stepped down from the stagecoach.

In that first swift glance she saw that Julie was still the reigning princess, aware that her father owned practically everything in the little cowtown. Julie's golden curls were brighter than the coin bracelet that tinkled on her wrist, and her yellow-brown eyes were about as innocent as a Persian cat's.

Then Bill was lifting Lucinda down from the step and for a precious moment his big figure blotted out everything else. He smiled into her eyes and she felt a flare of joy.

The others crowded around them and Bill set Lucinda on her feet, saying heartily, "I couldn't lose this bunch of mavericks, Lucy. Especially after I told them what a hit you were in Tucsonia and what a little beauty you'd turned out to be."

Lucinda caught a flash of Julie's challenging eyes, and she thought grimly that Bill had certainly struck the right note to set Julie against her with all her sharp little claws out. She forced herself to smile as she glanced around at the curious faces of the Carmichael boys from the Double T, baby Thompson, the mine superintendent's daughter, and the two strange Eastern girls to whom she was being introduced.

Lucinda found herself swept along to a lemonade party at Julie's. And Bill seemed happily blind to Julie all afternoon. He finally managed to draw Lucinda into a quiet corner. "Lucy," he began, "this has been the longest week I ever knew."

"Hold on," Julie's determined voice cut in. "You can't corral our returned rodeo champ, Lucinda." She thrust herself between them, and though her voice was light there was no laughter in the tawny glance that she flashed at Lucinda. "Your brother ran out on me, Lucinda, and I won't be deserted twice."

"Chuck ran out on you?" Lucinda sounded pleased and surprised, and Julie's face flushed darkly.

Julie promptly tucked her hand through Bill's. Lucinda got her dander up at the sight of that possessive gesture.

"The stage trip tired me so," Lucinda said in a bored voice. "I think I'd better run."

"Aw, now—" Bill began to protest.

"You poor thing, you do look all in," Julie cut in smoothly. "We'll drive you home on the way to the Harless ranch." She lifted a radiant smile to Bill. "Remember, you promised to show me the new team your father brought up from Mexico?"

As the smart, shining surrey stopped at Lucinda's little home Julie remarked maliciously, "Write and tell your handsome brother how I'm grieving for him, Lucinda." She deliberately snuggled up to Bill.

So this was Chuck's girl, Lucinda thought.

Her brother certainly had got some queer ideas at that engineering school. Well, she'd not let Julie Broderick know how serious Chuck was about her.

"You know Chuck," she said lightly. "Girls never worry him. Out of sight, out of mind, with my brother. And there are some charming girls who live quite near the university, I understand."

As Bill walked Lucinda to her door he said, "Too bad you're too tired to drive out with us, Lucy. How about tomorrow evening?"

"I'll think about it, Bill. You get in touch with me, won't you? Good-by." Lucinda flashed him a saucy smile and hurried into the house.

But Bill forgot about the tentative date he had made and didn't see Lucinda until several days after Lucinda's return to Mesquite. It was at a wiener roast Julie was staging in the dry wash of Walnut Creek. Lucinda was staring into the fire while the biscuit on her pointed willow wand burned to a crisp. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Julie with her arm around Bill's neck, laughingly inviting him to taste her sandwich.

A moment later Bill's voice spoke in her ear. His big brown fist came out to take the stick from her hand and knock the charred biscuit into the fire.

"What's the matter, Lucy?" he asked gravely. "You look bored. Maybe our parties and picnics don't amuse you. Maybe we seem pretty dull after Tucsonia. Is that it?"

"Maybe," Lucinda said easily. The big, blind idiot, she thought in angry rebellion. Couldn't he see that she was in love with him? "As a matter of fact, I'm terribly bored. I think I'll walk home. And I'd rather go alone."

She walked swiftly until she was out of sight and sound of the picnic party—a slender, proud figure in her boyish blue jeans and cowboy shirt, plodding through the deep sand. When she reached the road she leaned against a crumbling adobe wall for a moment.

A BLUE scarf knotted around her throat blew up against her face and she angrily rubbed her eyes with it. She heard the clatter of buggy wheels on the road, and turned abruptly away.

The buggy stopped. There was the grating of bootsoles on gravel. A shadow fell across hers. "Lucinda." It was Bill Harless' voice and he sounded angry. A firm hand took the scarf from her clenched fingers, drew it away from her tear-streaked face. There was a moment of silence.

"I figured things all wrong. Back in Tucsonia I thought coming home would be a touch of paradise, and it's been a bust all the way around. Except for my folks." He kicked a stone across the road. "I'd rather be back on the rodeo circuit or out in a cow-camp a thousand miles from nowhere than with that bunch of chattering baboons." He jerked his dark head toward Walnut Creek.

Lucinda caught her breath in amazement. Her voice quickened. "Oh, Bill, I'm so glad! I mean," she hastily explained as his startled glance caught hers, "I'm sorry you're disappointed, but—" She broke off in confusion. Her eyes turned starry-bright and her mouth curved provocatively. "I think a drive would help make us both feel good," she suggested.

They drove away from town, sitting close together in beautiful understanding. Lucinda had never seen so many flowers abloom on the desert floor—wild blue flax like babies' wide-open eyes, golden poppies and red Indian paintbrush, tiny yellow puff-ball blossoms on catclaw stems, smelling sweeter than any perfume ever sold in bottles.

After awhile she was humming one of the songs she sang at Riley's. Bill's arm held her lightly and they drove on and on until they reached Geronimo, the newly established county seat. They left the buggy at a livery stable and went into a cafe to eat. It was all like a dream to Lucinda, with Bill's gray eyes alight with tenderness, his hand strong and sure on her arm, and her own heart beating in excited little skips.

Later they walked around the plaza and sat on a log bench to admire the grandeur of the new brick courthouse. "I know an hombre who works in there," Bill mused. "Met him in Tucsonia."

A young cowboy and his girl, walking very close together, went past them and up the courthouse steps.

"Hey," Bill said, "that's Slim Dudley. He's going on the cattle drive."

But Slim had eyes for none but the girl clinging to his arm. A little later they came back through the big oak doors. There was no mistaking the radiant expression and the floating-on-clouds way in which they descended the stone steps.

"Why," Lucinda breathed, "they went to get a marriage license!"

Bill scowled. "Fellow has no business ty-

ing a girl up to marriage before setting out on that trail. No telling what might happen before he gets back."

Lucinda asked in a small voice, "What if she *wants* to be tied?"

"Nope." Bill jerked his Stetson down over one eye. "Plumb selfish of a man. How does he know he'll even come back? A girl can get along better if she's free."

"Oh." Lucinda withdrew her hand from his arm.

Bill sighed. After a moment he said gruffly, "Might as well go and speak to that hombre I know while we're here."

They went up the stone steps. Lucinda stumbled at the doorsill and Bill caught her in his arms. She could feel the hard, wild pound of his heart as she rested against him. He drew her inside and the oak doors swung together, leaving them in a shadowy gloom after the dazzling brightness of the sun outside.

"You think I'm right, don't you, Lucinda?" His voice was a deep growl. "About anyone getting married and then lighting out on a long, dangerous trail across country?"

"No, I don't think you're right," Lucinda said smartly. "Besides, anyone like you would surely come back safe."

"Well, come on!" Bill grabbed her arm and headed down the hall. "That hombre I know is in the marriage license bureau!"

Minutes later as they went down the steps with the license tucked in Bill's pocket, Lucinda knew how Slim's girl felt, floating along on rainbow clouds. She knew she looked just the way the other girl had looked, sparkling with a shine that came from the heart and showed through tremulous lips and radiant eyes. She closed her hand tight on Bill's arm.

Sitting in the buggy in front of Lucinda's home, with the twilight wrapping them in dusky shadows, they made their plans. Tomorrow evening Bill would come for her and they'd drive to the parsonage and be married. Quietly, just the two of them. Because there were only four more precious days before Bill left on the drive, and they wanted every hour of that time for their very own. Bill would explain to his parents, and Lucinda to her father.

"Mañana, darling, you'll be all mine," Bill whispered, his lips seeking hers. "We'll drive to a cabin I know in the Santa Isabella's, for our honeymoon."

She clung to him, glorying in his strength, his gentleness. Bill held her breathlessly close, pressed to the mad beat of his own heart. Mañana again, thought Lucinda, but she laughed softly. This time she didn't mind waiting for mañana. Bill took his leave a few moments later.

HER wedding day spun by in a rosy glow for Lucinda. At seven she was ready, her new suitcase beside her. At seven-thirty she was still waiting, and at eight the telephone jangled, churning up the panic that had been settling around her heart.

"Lucinda," it was Bill's voice, unmistakably blurred, "listen, honey, I can't get there for a while." Then almost impatiently, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Bill," Lucinda replied angrily. "I hear you.

"See you in a little while then. Bye, Lucy."

The phone went dead. She stood staring at it a moment before she carefully placed the receiver on its hook. She sat down to wait, arranging her filmy skirts carefully so they wouldn't wrinkle. And all the time she was trying not to remember that other time she waited for Bill Harless and watched that blowing curtain with frightened, aching eyes. She was trying to convince herself that she hadn't heard the faint sounds of tinny piano music through the telephone, that Bill's voice had sounded blurred because of a poor connection.

Nine o'clock came, then nine-thirty ticked by. Finally the phone rang again, and Bill's voice reached out for her, found her in that cold void in which she was lost.

"Lucinda? I'm sorry as heck, honey, but—" Lucinda's head filled with a roaring sound. She gripped the receiver tightly. Bill was mumbling something vague. He ended up definitely enough, "—so we'll make it tomorrow night instead, Lucinda. Good old mañana again."

Good? Lucinda wanted to laugh hysterically. She couldn't make a sound, and in the silence she distinctly heard the blare of dance music, and running through that the murmur of a voice that could only be Julie Broderick's.

"Darling," said Bill, "aren't you glad—"

The receiver went as quiet as though someone had placed a hasty hand over the mouthpiece at the other end of the line. Then Bill's voice broke in harshly, "Lucinda! Are you still there? Something's come up and I can't get there tonight. We'll make

it tomorrow night instead, and—"

"I can hear very well, Bill." Lucinda's voice was high and thin. "You said we'd make it tomorrow night." Then she hung up.

Bill and Julie were together, having themselves a gay time at one of the honkatonks down on the Border. No mistaking that music and the sounds of revelry that Lucinda had heard. Of course Julie could get away with anything—being Julie Broderick.

But who cared about Julie? Lucinda had to face the truth. Bill had neatly left her waiting again. She might have known it wouldn't last. It was just a dream she'd had. This was Bill's way of getting rid of her, as he'd done once before. Tomorrow night he'd have some other excuse. But tomorrow night she wouldn't be here.

* * * * *

Lucinda took the night stage to Tucsonia. She was gladly welcomed back at Riley's house and at the Steak Palace the next evening.

"Lucinda, gal," said Riley with frank admiration, "you make everyone of those lonesome waddies think for a little while that he's back home, wherever that is. Don't you run away again or I'll have to close this place. Even if the rodeo is over there's always plenty of ranchers and cowboys around town and it looks like you have a steady job here if you want it."

Lucinda smiled wistfully. It was good to feel that she was missed and appreciated somewhere. "How about the *Chisholm Trail*, sis?" suggested one of the cowboys who crowded three deep around the piano.

The next evening, singing again to the crowd, putting a bit of her own heart-hunger into the simple songs, Lucinda felt her glance drawn upward. She raised her lashes, and her fingers crashed on the keys. She was staring full into Bill Harless' furious gray eyes. It was like facing the blinding blaze of powerful twin flares.

She dropped her glance. Her cheeks burned scarlet. She looked down at the piano keys and began to play again. When she finished the piece Bill was still there.

"Dance," he suggested, in a way that was a definite command.

She gave up her place to a plump little wrangler who winked at her and promptly began to play a slow, dreamy waltz.

Lucinda was cold and trembling in Bill's arms, but she kept her smile bright on her face and her slippered feet seemed of their own will to follow his steps.

"What's the idea of running away?" he asked, and his angry voice matched his eyes.

"I decided," Lucinda replied, "that you were right the other day in Geronimo when you said a girl shouldn't rush into marriage."

"So you're afraid of marriage." Bill's hand tightened on her waist. "What about love? Is that outlawed yet?"

"Oh, love is all right," Lucinda admitted with a break in her voice.

"I reckon we agree on that," Bill snapped. "But I want marriage, too."

The waltz ended and he took her back to the piano. He took his Stetson from the top of it. "See you tomorrow night," he stated, and strode through the crowd.

MANANA again, Lucinda thought dully. The evening was a blank for her from then on. He'd probably never come back. Every time she looked up she could see only Bill's broad-shouldered, long-legged figure thrusting through the crowd without a backward glance at her. In every cowboy's request for a song she heard Bill's bitter, accusing voice.

Though she looked up every time the door of the restaurant opened next evening, with her heart beating painfully and her breath suspended, Bill never appeared. But when she started to leave, stepping out into the cool darkness, he was there, standing beside a buggy hitched to the rack.

"Get in," he invited peremptorily, and lifted her to the high seat. Well, Lucinda decided, they might as well have everything out between them, and get it all finished up neatly.

When they reached the outskirts of town Lucinda could stand it no longer. "Take me home," she said, through lips that were stiff from her effort to keep them steady.

"Later," Bill replied, seemingly intent on his driving.

He turned the horses onto a dim road that led up into the Santa Isabella mountains. Sage and cholla gave way to scrub oak and manzanita, and the dark bulk of evergreens showed against the starry sky. The air had a new coolness and the scent of cedar.

Panic struck through the girl. If Bill Harless had some wild idea of running off with her after what had happened he had just

better change his plans and pronto!

Finally the buggy swerved from the weed-grown tracks and came to a stop before a darkened cabin set in a clearing.

"This place belongs to a friend of mine," Bill announced as though that explained everything.

He lifted Lucinda to the ground with a firm grip. Inside the cabin he lit a kerosene lamp set on a bare, polished table. The lamplight showed a large, cozy room furnished with bright Indian rugs and redwood chairs and couches. Bill knelt before the fireplace where a fire was laid. "Be warm in a jiffy." He struck a match and kindled the shavings.

"I d-don't get your idea," Lucinda began.

He tossed his hat on the table. "Don't you, Lucinda?" He turned to face her and the firelight leaping high in the crossed sticks of kindling showed the faint, mirthless smile on his lips, the smouldering intensity of his eyes. "Did you really think that you could kiss me the way you did the other evening and let it stop there? Do you figure that all you have to do is change your mind? I wanted to marry you and you ran away. Why?"

Lucinda's breath fluttered in her throat. She said shakily, "It's *you* who changes all the time."

"Oh, no, Lucinda," he said softly, moving toward her. "I meant what I said. Every word of it. I love you and I want to marry you, and I believe you love me."

He reached out and drew her coat from her shoulders. "You won't need this now." His arms closed tightly around her, burning through the taffeta of her gown.

"Bill—don't—" Her protest was lost against his lips, crushing hers. She was bent back against the hard curve of his arm, and she couldn't stop the utterly possessive demand of his mouth on hers. She couldn't control the wild tide of love and desire that leaped to life beneath his kiss, that rose madly through her, throbbed like a lawless song on her lips responding to his.

Across the room a window was open and the breeze whipped a faint fragrance through the air. It distracted Lucinda. She turned her lips from Bill's, caught another whiff. She stiffened. That was Julie Broderick's well-known, specially mixed perfume! Everyone in Mesquite and the Horseshoe Valley was familiar with that exotic scent and just how much it cost an ounce.

Lucinda's glance darted around the room. She tore herself free from Bill's arms and ran to the mantel. There she picked up a handkerchief with the embroidered initials, J. and B. It was the source of the tell-tale perfume.

She whirled to confront Bill. "Julie Broderick's been here! And not long ago, either!"

"Um," he remarked, with a one-sided grin, "I always said that darn perfume of hers was too strong."

"Bill Harless, how dare you joke about this?" Lucinda choked on her shock and rage. "What do you think I am? Your once-in-a-while girl? Someone to make love to when *she* isn't around?" She scooped her coat. "I hate you and I never want to see you again." Sobs rose thick in her throat. "I'm going back to town and don't you follow me."

She took three running steps before he caught her. "Listen, lady, you're not going anywhere." He lifted her high in his arms and carried her across the room. He dropped her onto a wide couch and stood over her. "This is one time, Lucinda Garett, that you're not running away from trouble. You'll stay and fight it out for once."

She jerked erect and blazed at him, eyes darkly blue in her white face. "I won't do anything of the sort!"

"Easy. I said *listen.*" He yanked a chair up and sat down facing her. "I happen to be the hombre that loves you and that gives me the right to tell you a few things. You're always running away. Things hurt you and you stampede away and feel sorry for yourself forever after."

SHE started to protest, but he talked her down. "I'll bet you've even felt like a martyr about Chuck going to college and you giving up your music lessons to take a job in Tucsonia."

Her eyes stung with the tears that she savagely held back. "I wanted him to go!" she cried. "It made me proud to help him."

"Sure. But you wanted to study music too," he insisted. "Chuck could have worked his way through school. He had no idea that you were giving up what you wanted for him." His sharp glance holding hers forced her to be silent. "It wouldn't have been nearly so easy for you as getting a job in the city. You'd have had to fight for everything if you went away to school yourself. You'd have had your feelings hurt and you'd have had to fight back. Even Julie had her setbacks away at boarding school."

"Don't you dare compare me with her!" Lucinda flared.

"Why not? Sure, Julie's a grabber and a taker, but she never runs away." He stared sternly at Lucinda. "Look, the way I'd been bragging about you, Julie was all set to defend her popularity when you came home from Tucsonia. But at the first sign of battle you quit the arena, Lucinda."

Lucinda's eyes held sparks of fire. "I wouldn't fight for any man," she declared.

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it." Bill's face reddened. "Listen, you're not just a pretty little mouse. I might have thought you were if I hadn't seen you knock them dead in Tucsonia. That's why I don't savvy why you let them push you around."

"Because of you, that's why!" It was out before she could stop herself. She sprang to her feet and confronted him with her head flung back. "Because ever since I was in the sixth grade all I could see or think about was you. It made me self-conscious and stupid and tongue-tied."

Bill looked startled. "But why didn't you let me know it?"

"Let you know it!" Lucinda cried. "How about that time you were going to take me buggy riding and stood me up? You broke my heart then and you didn't even care."

He looked bewildered. "Stood *you* up?" He scowled as he dipped into the foggy depths of school-day memories. "You don't mean that time I—oh, yeah. I had a row with my dad and he wouldn't let me take the rig out that night." He glared savagely at her. "I couldn't tell the girl that, could I? Not when I was a button of seventeen. And what did you do before I could see you?"

Lucinda felt a warm flush on her cheeks. "I don't remember," she said haughtily.

"Well, I'll tell you." He caught her shoulders and shook her to emphasize his words. "You ran away, just like you did this time. Ran away to feel sorry for yourself. Instead of sticking around and battling it out, finding out the whole story, you always run away to cry about your troubles."

Lucinda wasn't listening. As he paused for breath she asked softly, "Was that it, honestly, Bill? Why you didn't come that night? You didn't just ditch me for—Julie?" She was smiling and a dimple twinkled at the corner of her mouth.

Bill tried to remain angry, but he couldn't in the face of that dimple. His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Lucinda, I haven't finished telling you—"

He gave up and kissed her. An inner door swung open and an indignant voice broke into their happiness.

"Holy smoke, how much longer do we have to sit out in the kitchen?"

"Chuck!" Lucinda turned in Bill's arms to face her brother.

There he stood, his hair that was redder than hers blazing in the firelight, his blue eyes laughing. And Julie Broderick hanging onto his arm as though she belonged there.

"Yeah, me." Chuck came across the room to give her a resounding kiss. "Old Bill dragged me up here to tell you about the ruckus the other night. Looks like he was doing all right without my help."

"Chuck, you have a black eye!" Lucinda said anxiously.

Chuck grinned. "Didn't Bill tell you about that, Sis?" He reached out to draw Julie nearer to him. "This little wench wrote me a letter about Bill. Just Bill, Bill, Bill, and what good times they were having with him back in Mesquite. Well, I went on the rampage. I blasted up to Mesquite, called Bill out to Smitty's Tavern and tied into him before he knew what hit him."

"I called you from there the first chance I got, Lucinda," Bill put in quickly.

"And I just happened to see Bill leaving town to meet Chuck and followed him," Julie added.

Just happened like fun, Lucinda thought, and knifed her a glance that meant that she'd deal with her later. Then a sudden thought struck her. What if Julie Broderick were to be her sister-in-law some day? She swallowed nervously, and then relaxed. Chuck certainly seemed capable of handling Julie.

Julie had taken over the explanation. "I walked into one swell fight. Bill was trying to hold Chuck off and tell him I was nothing but a pal to him, and Chuck was too mule-headed to listen to a word." She squeezed Chuck's arm and stared adoringly up at him. "By the time Chuck calmed down he had a black eye and Bill had a cut on his mouth."

"That's when I made the second phone call," Bill added.

LUCINDA turned to Julie. "Then it was your voice I heard over the phone that second time? You were talking to Chuck?"

"Sure. The poor dear needed consolation,"

Julie admitted. "All I wanted to do in the first place was to keep him from forgetting me while he was away."

"But why didn't you tell me what was going on?" Lucinda asked Bill.

Chuck flushed. "I made him promise not to, Lucinda. I didn't want you to see me or know that I had sneaked away from school. Bill here drove me to Geronimo that night so I could catch the train back. I barely made it back to school for exams."

Lucinda was silent. She was beginning to feel ashamed of herself. If Bill had driven Chuck to Geronimo that night he couldn't have got back to Mesquite till early morning. But she hadn't waited. She'd run away. She looked at Bill now in a way that was meant for him alone.

Chuck said quickly, "Well, everything's all right now, so we'll run along." He gave Lucinda a quick kiss. "Nice going, Sis."

He and Julie went out on a fresh wave of her pungent perfume. Bill closed the door on them.

"Don't ever run away from me again, Lucy," he said huskily. "Meet me with a rolling pin if you want, but *be* there."

"I will, if you want me."

She was half-laughing and half-crying as he took her into his arms. Suddenly they seemed very much alone in the cabin with the dying fire casting enormous shadows on the walls.

Lucinda's heart was hammering painfully in her breast, and she was all one aching question which she dared not ask.

"Now about that honeymoon," Bill remarked, and Lucinda swallowed the hard lump that was choking off her breath. He reached into his pocket. "Here's our license, still waiting to be used. And there's a Justice of the Peace in Tucsonia who promised me to wait up till we got there."

He bundled Lucinda into her coat and held her for a moment, kissing her damp eyelids, her soft, flushed cheeks.

"Bill," she whispered in sheer wonder, "this time it isn't mañana. It's tonight."

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE GHOSTS OF BUCKSKIN RUN

A Thrill-Packed Action Novelet

By JIM MAYO

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

The bartender struck Tollinger a stunning blow

General Delivery

By NORMAN W. HAY

Sometimes a postmaster's curiosity can come in handy!

THE strain of living the spiritually decent life was beginning to depress Pat Land, bachelor marshal of Longhorn Crossing. No more poker games. No beers with visiting cowhands. No dropping in at ranches owning pretty daughters, or at the schoolhouse, either. No more arguments with strange riders who jumped hotel and livery bills. Just go for his gun and lock them up!

To his crimson-faced embarrassment, Marshal Land had been informed by "Gabby" Smith that Molly Ringle was at last returning from visiting relatives in El Paso. But the marshal didn't thank the postmaster for this news.

"Stop holding private envelopes up to a lamp and gossiping about the writing inside," Marshal Land had said. "I'm not interested."

Nevertheless, each morning now Pat Land called at the barber shop for a hot bath, a close shave, a trim, and a spray of scent. Dressed in red silk shirt and tan Frontier pants, he sat tilted against the front of the stage station, wondering if the Bar Cross girl would ever forgive him for shooting a mad dog that was about to bite the pretty new teacher.

For four afternoons the big Concord coach from Roswell rolled to a dusty halt without passengers. The jehu tossed down a mail sack to Gabby, who limped off muttering under his breath.

On the fifth afternoon only two strangers disembarked. Colts guns sagged at their hips. The one with scarecrow shoulders was badly sunburned, which provided a clue. Marshal Land recognized from old circulars "Border" Tollinger, evidently just released from prison

for cattle theft. The smaller man with the spade beard could only have been Joe Blackburn, a quick-draw killer, arrested often but never convicted.

With a feeling they boded ill for Longhorn Crossing, Marshal Land watched them cross the street with their saddles and warsacks. They entered the Cattlemen's Bar and Hotel. Then the marshal mosied down to the calaboose to check Wanted posters, but there was nothing for them.

At suppertime, when Land paraded his badge into Ling's Restaurant, the two undesirables were just leaving the counter.

"We heard you own two fine-blooded Morgan quarter horses," said Tollinger uneasily. "We'll pay four hundred for the pair."

Marshal Land removed his flat-brimmed hat and scratched the back of his curly head. "No, I'm keeping them to start a horse ranch. But I might find you some horseflesh if you plan to stay here long."

"We want your broncs," said Joe Blackburn coldly.

"You can't have them at any price," said Land with finality.

Blackburn and Tollinger exchanged glances, then went out of the eating place.

At the counter was Gabby Smith, wolfing down stew and cornbread, and listening to everything. Pat Land had a criminal desire to ask if Molly had written home again to her folks. But Gabby's scowling silence told him that the postmaster would not be speaking for at least another week.

That night the marshal fastened his lion hound in the stable with the quarter horses that could out-run and out-last any other mounts in the Pecos valley. He put double padlocks on the doors and rigged up a signal trap. But all these precautions were wasted.

Next day Tollinger and Blackburn familiarized themselves with the trail town by purchasing some provisions at the general store, talking with the liveryman, changing some bills at the two-by-four bank, playing poker, and watching the stage pass through.

Pat Land was grateful that Molly didn't arrive. His former depression tensed into an alarm for the future. So, along toward evening, he stepped into the Cattlemen's Bar to break his self-appointed drought with a glass of beer. He found Tollinger and Blackburn there, as if waiting for him, their guns slung forward.

"Tollinger, how long do you and Blackburn plan to remain?" the marshal demanded.

Tollinger's breath sucked in, and Blackburn stepped swiftly aside. Patently they hadn't believed themselves recognized.

"Until you sell us the Morgans," Tollinger suddenly said.

"You're not going to get them, so you better drift on," Marshal Land said, and he gave them his back as he walked out of the bar.

That night Land slept with a gun under his pillow. He prayed that Molly wouldn't arrive next day. But early in the afternoon Sam Ringle's buckboard halted not far from the stage station, and the Bar Cross owner waved knowingly at the marshal. The big Concord coach rolled up. Molly stepped out, and Pat Land sprang to his feet from tilted chair.

"Molly!" he cried like an excited sixteen-year-old. "Are you going to forgive me?"

She was so pretty in her beautiful blue silk dress, with lace collar and a stylish new bonnet and parasol. Her gray eyes flashed and her chestnut curls danced.

"How do you do, marshal," she said haughtily. "I had almost forgotten all about you. Shooting any more pets lately?"

"Molly, that dog had rabies!"

"Good day, Marshal. I see my father waiting."

As she drove off in the buckboard, showing her finery proudly to Longhorn Crossing, Pat Land noted that Tollinger and Blackburn were watching from under the wooden awning of the general store. Their ugly faces were cracked in knowing grins. A cold shudder went through the marshal. Hitching up his own gun belt, he strode for the calaboose, ready to shoot anything and everything, except Molly, of course.

At sunset, the blacksmith's boy, Jimmy Riley, appeared at the jail, breathless.

"That tall stranger gave me a nickel to tell you he'll pay six hundred for your Morgans and leave town, Mr. Land."

The marshal's fists clenched. Tollinger's offer could only be interpreted as a threat to Molly Ringle's safety.

"Go right home and stay with your pop," Pat Land ordered the boy.

THE marshal changed to a black shirt with black buttons and a black hat with a wide brim that would shade his hard blue eyes from hanging lamps. He rubbed oil

against the inside of his holster and eased his .45 up and down.

He was a determined man when he started up the street in the last red glow of day. As he passed the post office, where Gabby Smith was taking his wistful ease in a rocker in the open front door, the post master acted as if there was nothing at all between them.

"Good evening, Marshal," said Gabby, rocking gently back and forth. "Ain't those your war clothes? Hope you ain't going calling on Molly that way."

"Keep your nose out of my business and other people's mail," Land snapped.

Gabby was unruffled. "Try to run those strangers out of town, Pat, and it will kick back in your face, because you ain't got any charge yet against them. That'll be something more Molly will have against you, as well as protecting the pretty new schoolteacher."

Furious, Pat Land turned to cross the street. But he knew Gabby was right about not having a legal charge against Tollinger and Blackburn. If the marshal exceeded his authority and tried to lock them up, they would shoot in defense of their civil rights. Yet Tollinger's presence in Longhorn Crossing was unbearable. It was up to Pat Land to run him and Blackburn out, civil rights or no civil rights. It was a question of Land's manhood—and his love for Molly Ringle.

As the marshal walked through the batwing doors of the Cattlemen's Bar, he recognized the old poker group at the corner table and the baldheaded bartender, who was polishing glasses with his apron skirt as he talked with Tollinger and Blackburn, standing with drinking legs raised to the brass rail. They saw Land in the bar mirror. They were evidently waiting for him. They turned slowly, stepping away from each other, to make two targets.

"Tollinger," Pat Land called out, halting with shoulders bent forward, "you and Blackburn have no good business here. Are you leaving or shall I lock you up?"

Tollinger's lips cracked in an evil grin as Blackburn moved farther away along the bar. "We're not vagrants because we pay our bills," said Tollinger. "You've got no grounds for arrest. We'll leave when you sell us the Morgans. Pull a gun on us, Marshal, and we'll shoot in self defense in front of witnesses."

Cold fear touched Pat Land's heart but briefly and then his nerves tingled, for he knew he had to fight, else be written down as a coward. He wasn't afraid to die, but he wanted to take both of them along with him, for that would prevent anything happening to Molly. He held the tension for long, hoping it would unnerve the two gunmen.

Then, through the quiet of the barroom, broke a shrill voice from an open window.

"I got Blackburn covered with a shotgun, Pat." It was Gabby Smith speaking. "You just tackle Tollinger. He's carrying a letter from Fort Sumner, which tells him when the Bar Cross trail herd money is to be taken across the Pecos River at the upper ford. That's what they're after. Arrest them."

Pat Land saw Blackburn's arms lift stubbornly. The killer was cool and had never been convicted of a crime. But Tollinger was impulsive and had just served a jail term, and the quick thought of going back brought a snarl of hatred to his lips. His right hand swept across the top of his holster, jerking a gun loose.

The marshal was catching the butt of his own .45, thumbing back the gun hammer as the barrel jumped upward into aim. But before Pat Land could shoot, and before Tollinger could shoot, the bartender leaned from behind the counter and struck Tollinger a stunning crack with the heavy bung starter. Tollinger's eyes went white as he collapsed senseless to the floor.

Pat Land swallowed back the dryness of his throat. "Thanks, Baldy," he said.

Gun in hand, he stepped forward and relieved Blackburn of his gun, then the unconscious Tollinger, whom he searched, bringing to light a letter. There was the information that Gabby Smith had spotted by holding an envelope to a lamp, and perhaps steaming open the letter later. Pat Land looked up as the postmaster climbed through the window and came forward, chuckling.

"I could tell you something else, too," said Gabby triumphantly. "If you'd only come down off your high horse, Marshal, and apologize humbly to Molly Ringle for shooting a dog, she'll marry you. That is, of course, if you haven't called on the pretty schoolmarm while she was away. She wrote that to her mother—"

"I don't want to hear," Pat Land snapped. "I've got a good mind to lock you up with Tollinger and Blackburn."

Nevertheless, Marshal Pat Land rode out the next day to the Bar Cross, his best hat in his hand and a humble apology in his heart.

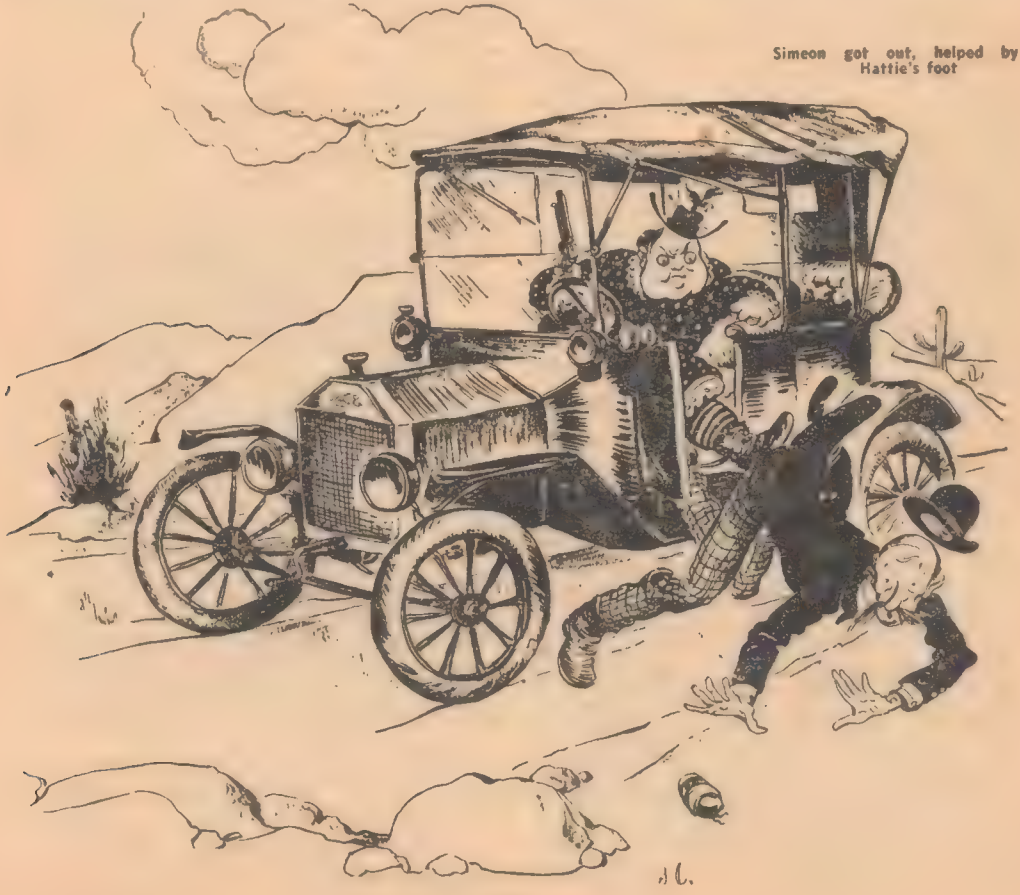
The Marry Widow

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When Milldew needs a wedding, Hattie wants to be the bride, but when her groom proves a wolf she is almost the goat!

IT WAS a touching picture at the Bijou in Milldew, Montana. Even Hattie Pringle, no longer a shy young maid by any manner of means, felt the little butterflies in her stomach and forgot all material things. All around her the young blades were getting their heads closer to the belles they had brought, and so she thought of her departed husband, "Poison Pete" Pringle, and sighed deeply.

The flicker was all about a widow, too. She owned a homestead in a bosky valley and it had a mortgage on it. So in the first reel along comes the hombre holding said mortgage and spots the widow's daughter picking phlox in the front garden. But does



Simeon got out, helped by Hattie's foot

he make like a timber wolf? He does not. He tips his hat to the fair damsel and goes up to the door and raps his kid gloved knuckles on the pine. The widow answers, is told who her visitor is. She pales. The mortgager is not exactly a brash younker, but has swatches of silver at his temples. He rocks on his heels for a moment, then says he did not expect such a charming mortgagee.

"Flattery is of no use," the widow says, and Hattie was on the point of hissing. "I cannot meet the overdue payment. I am at your mercy."

"Let me assure you I am in no need of ready cash, ma'am," says the caller. "But I am famished after my long journey."

Followed two more reels which proved to the spectators that Sir Reginald Cosgrove was not in the least bit interested in the widow's daughter or foreclosing on the old homestead. The landlord plainly shows he intends to unwidow the mortgage.

The love scenes softened Hattie's anvil-like chin, stepped up the cadence of her old fuel pump. After the final clinch on the screen she got up and moved up the aisle, a little bird song in her ears. A patron planted a boot on her most painful corn and she was unaware of it.

"Le's see," she murmured to herself. "That widow wa'n't much younger'n me. Why, I got a chance—oh, bushwash!"

OUT in the little lobby, Judge Tolliver, Milldew's leading interpreter of Blackstone, nudged her.

"Don't let that pitcher fool you, Hattie, ha! All them Civil War vets have got homes to go to."

"Folks shouldn't git hung for some murders like one I got in mind, you old bag of bones!" Hattie yelped, reality striking her in the face like a cold and wet dishcloth. "You got no more sediment in you than a goose has fins."

"I ain't been married nearly fifty years not to know most of them movie pitchers are just so much mushy blah blah that couldn't happen," the judge twanged. "And somethin' ought to be done about the type of pitchers Rush Dunkle brings to Milldew. Gits our young uns to moonin' in public. Maybe gits some folks married who wished they hadn't. If you was tendin' to business, you'd censhure them things 'fore they was showed."

"Why, you ol' moss bucket!" Hattie yelped. "You narrer-minded grampa to a billy goat! Git out of my way!"

Hattie left the Bijou, unwary bystanders bouncing off her ample hips. She took a stand in front of the drugstore and waited for a certain couple, Asma Lumbee and Jonah Orping. They finally hove into sight and Hattie felt a twinge near her brisket for they appeared no happier than as many calves roped and thrown for the branding iron.

"Hello, kids," Hattie greeted. "Even if you had a lovers' ruckus that pitcher should've melted you to sweet sirup."

"Pa'll tell you," Jonah said, and heaved a sigh. "Want a lemon soda, Asma?"

"Don't feel like doin' nothin' but dyin', Jonah," the fair maid chocked out. "Jus' walk me home."

Hattie felt little minnows swimming through the fluid of her spinal column. She put what she was thinking out of her mind, but it came hopping back. No, it couldn't be. Oh, gobs!

Behind the Milldew library, in a little square lot hemmed in by an ornate iron fence was a stone tablet that said:

> On This Spot The First Marriage In Milldew Was Celebrated. Between Darius J. Milldew And Hepzibah Tatum. April 17th, 1846. The Rev. Hosiah Dow Officiating.

For the past fifty years, the citizens of the town had seen to it that a wedding took place on April 17th, in honor of the founder of the aforementioned community, and on the site of the first splicing. This year, Jonah Orping was to take unto himself a wife, nee Asma Lumbee.

"Couldn't be nothin' wrong. They wa'n't fightin'. Jonah's pa has five thousan' to start 'em off," Hattie mused aloud, and went into the drugstore and ordered a lemon soda. Getting it, she took a small bottle out of her reticule and dumped the contents into the very soft snort.

"I got nq liquor license here, Hattie," the bald-headed man behind the counter griped. "If somebody should see you—"

"Look, it is medicine perscribed fer me. Three times a day an' I fergot to take the first two doses. An' shut up!"

"If that ain't elderberry, it snows in the Painted Desert in July, Hattie!"

"Mos' tonics have alky in 'em," Hattie

sniffed, put the empty vanilla bottle back into her warbag and left the store with her chin up.

She got into her Model T and started homeward, changed her mind half way there, and drove to the Orping wikiup at the foot of Shoo Bird Mountain. Lysander Orping sold lumber and did mill work. He was sitting on the porch of the clapboard house when Hattie drove into the yard, and the front legs of his chair came down with a bang.

The jalopy stopped a foot from his front porch stoop and nearly erased one of his prize Plymouth Rocks.

"What you want, Fatty, just as if I couldn't guess the firs' shot out of the box?"

"What's ailin' Jonah an' Asma, huh?"

HATTIE extricated herself from behind the wheel, half jumped and half fell to the ground. She pushed her old hat from in front of her eyes, then walked up to the porch and sat down.

"Been aimin' to tell you fer days, Hattie," Lysander said sheepishly. "Didn' want folks to think I was such a sucker. I ain't got that five thousan'!"

"You ain't got what?"

"You heard me the first time. Remember that slick gent come to your office an' wanted to sell you half the shares in a oil well? It sounded so good you almost bit. Well, I did!"

Hattie sent her mind loping over the back trail. "Yeah, a fancy pants smellin' of lavender juice named Pomeroy Pusey. Always had a raw egg in his whisky an' sprinkled the snort with cinnamon. Yep, he had a way with him, but I soon sent him on it, ha!"

"I says to myself at the time all oil an' mine permoters can't be crooked, Hattie," Lysander Orping said ruefully. "We got gold an' kerosene an' that there must be thousan's of gas wagons like yourn have to be filled up. I figgered to git the laugh on you."

"So Jonah can't marry Asma, havin' no visible means of support," Hattie said, her spirits falling to her shinbones.

"Not enough in this business hardly to support me an' Veronica," Lysander admitted sadly. "Asma'll have to wait until Jonah gits a start somewheres."

"You know what this means to Milldew, you ol' blubberhead?" Hattie yelped. "We got to have a weddin' on April Seventeenth an' you know it!"

"Awright, have one, but you financh it, you ol' tub of lard!" Orping howled.

"Seein' what your son's name is I should whale the aitch out of you," Hattie flung back. "Well, I better git goin'. Got another two pair of love birdies might be ready to step in instead."

"Some day you'll git that pokey snoot where it don't belong oncet too often," Lysander twanged. "You don't have no luck runnin' a whizzer on any young uns, so why don't you be the bride yourself, huh? Ol' Charlie Buffalo-In-The-Chips over at the reservation's been lookin' all around fer a squaw."

Lysander was sitting with his chair tipped back and with no wall behind him, and all that Hattie had to do was stick out a foot and shove. She was driving out of the gate before Jonah's pa got articulate and the cuss words had no chance to make themselves heard above the racket of the Model T's powerplant.

Hattie, having no time to fritter away, drove past the Oomlaut place. Sure enough, Vickie was sitting on the piazza with Folsom Ick. Hattie drove into the yard.

"Evenin', dearies. Some pitcher at the Bijou! Saw you there. You heard Jonah an' Asma won't git hitched on Darius Milldew Day "

"Wha-a-a-a-a?" Vickie yipped.

"So I figgered maybe you an' Folsom—"

"Oh, you did, huh?" the swain sniffed. "Well, I'm goin' to college to study osteopathy fer a year an' Vickie just said she'd wait fer me until I got my office set up. An' mind your own business, you ol'—"

"Folsom!" Vickie admonished.

"Good evenin'," Hattie gulped, and advanced the spark on the wheel, got the engine wheezing. This time she went straight home and took a healthy snort of elderberry.

"Huh, times've changed. Love didn't have no patience in my day. You met the hombre, got the whim-whams, walked on your heels, an' then bango, you dragged a sky pilot outa bed. Bushwash!"

AT NINE-THIRTY the next morning, hope still flickering under her ample camisole, Hattie got out of the skitterbuggy in front of Ole Svensen's saddle shop. Ole had some work on his skiving block when Hattie lumbered in.

"Mornin'. You break your cinch, Hattie?"

"Le's stop kiddin'," Hattie said. "You got word that boat's in from Sweden? Was due in New York yesterday, wa'n't it? In two weeks times then Hilda'll be here an' you'll git married. She'll look mighty sweet in that ol' hoopskirt, Ole."

"I bane got me a letter this morning, Hattie. Hilda bane not coming for sixt' months. Joos' as she bane about to sail, she bane gat chicken pox, yah. Always it bane som'-thing."

Hattie grabbed at a saddlehorn and hung on.

Ole Svensen quickly snagged a can of varnish and held it under Hattie's nose. "Almos' bane as good as smallin' salt, Hattie. You bane tak' a good sniff."

"I ought to drink the ding danged can dry," Hattie gulped out, then felt her way toward the door like a sleepwalker. "The firs' time in fifty years an' no wed—gobs of fire!"

She got out of her Model T in front of her office building and paused to pass the time of day with two hombres who had hived up together out by Sugarloaf Mountain for nearly twenty years, and whose source of income was anybody's guess. Crowfoot Houk and Hen Yeeper.

"Nice mornin', ma'am," Crowfoot said.

"Nice mornin', ma'am," Hen echoed.

Crowfoot hitched up a frayed gallus, and Hen did likewise.

"I'm thirsty, Crowfoot," Hen said.

"I'm thirsty, Crowfoot agreed. They angled toward the Milldew House after both tipped their hats.

Hattie sighed. "Two ol' batches been together so much they got to look like each other an' their minds work as one. Both put their chaws in the same side of their faces. Ha!"

She climbed the stairs to her office and dropped with a loud plunk and a grunt into her reinforced armchair. She looked up at the picture that hung on the wall and felt mushiness in her heart. "You'd only come walkin' back right now, you ol' rascal, we'd have that weddin'. You in a long tailed coat an' beaver hat, an' me in a hoopskirt, yep. We—we'd — b-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z — brum-mph — blo-o-osh—z-z-z-z-z-z-z!

Hattie Phingle awoke with a start. Someone was in the office and saying, "Ahem-ahem!" She swung her head around and saw the stranger standing near the door, and tried to let out a screech. Her pipes froze up and she might as well have been nailed to the chair.

"What's scarin' you, ma'am?" the visitor asked.

His voice sounded like Pete's used to. He was as tall and he had the same style mustache. There was a go-devil squint to his left eye. No, he did not look exactly like the picture on the wall because Pete had only been forty when the photographer had asked him to watch the little birdie. He was "Poison Pete" Pringle as Hattie had pictured her ex-spouse would be when pushing sixty.

"Go 'way," Hattie finally gulped, little butterflies having a rodeo in her lonesome ticker. "I was only kiddin'."

"Sorry to have alarmed you, dear lady. Let me introduce myself. I am Simeon G. Gilpington, geologist. I am here to study Montana's folded strong and weak strata, its peneplain and residual ridges—it's second cycle mountain and intermont basins."

"Nope, you ain't a ghost," Hattie sighed. "We got them things in this state? Is that bad, huh?"

"Not at all," Gilpington smiled, gathered up his coat-tails and sat down.

"The pitcher on the wall there," Hattie said in a voice as tight as her new set of stays. "You ever look like that?"

THE visitor took a gander at Pete and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Jehosaphat, ma'am! Like the li'l feller said who saw his face in a freshly polished cuspidor in his pa's saloon, 'I'm his spittin' image!' "

"Spooky, huh?" Hattie forced out. "He was my husban'. Owlhoot got him. Heard everybody's got a double somewheres, Mr. Gilpin'ton. Anybody'd said Pete had I'd laffed until I popped a gusset. Anyway, what business you got with me as I never had nothin' to do with the typograftical mess Montana is in." Hattie tried to be as casual as a toad sunning itself on a rock and blamed the disturbance in the vicinity of her meridian on "something she'd et." Just looking at Simeon G. Gilpington gave her solace and sent a warm glow all the way from her coiffure to the tips of her toes.

"Well, I have been told office space is at a premium in your bustling community, my dear lady," Gilpington said. "Of course it is presumptious on my part but perhaps you

could let me use the facilities of your expansive office for two weeks—or even three?"

"Why—er—of courst, Mr. Gilpington!" Hattie blurted, and wanted to kick herself a moment later for not arguing the point for a little while. She did not dare look up at Pete.

"That is fine, ma'am, just fine!" Simeon G. got up and bowed from the waist. He did look up at the picture of the late Pete Pringle. "Amazin', ma'am. I seem to belong here. I shall bring the things I need over here later in the day. Again, I am forever indebted to you."

When the hombre had taken his leave, Hattie was covered with goose pimples. She waddled over to a mirror and looked at her image and wished she hadn't.

"Oh, well, I'll git me a mud pack an' a new hair-do. Maybe even a eyebrow-pencil. An' a—"

The building shook. The likeness of the former sheriff on the wall rattled against the plaster. Hattie stood petrified, then told herself the reason for the disturbance.

"It is that jellyology. A earthquake somewheres in the second sickle mountains. I'll have to ast Simeon."

Hattie caught a second glimpse of Simeon Gilpington in the dining room of the Milldew House two hours later. She put ketchup in her coffee and milk and sugar on her roast beef hash but the victuals tasted like manna from Heaven just the same. Simeon G. nodded to her and smiled, and she put plenty salt and pepper on her wedge of lemon pie. Finished, she placed her reading glasses on the plate with her knife and put the fork in her reticule.

Walking out into the lobby, she had the whim-whams. She walked on her heels. She was tapped on the arm by a reedy matron named Mrs. Foody Williker.

"Hattie, I been lookin' for you. There's a special meetin' of the Milldew Cultural an' Uplift Society at my house at three."

"I am uplifted about as fer as I can be, Zenobia," Hattie gurgled. "You ever see such a perfeck day?"

"If it wa'n't rainin'—lemme smell your breath, Hattie," Mrs. Williker snapped.

"I'll be at your throuse at hee," Hattie mumbled. . . .

Mrs. Tolliver banged the meeting to order. The purpose of the sudden death powwow was to discuss the type of pictures they were showing at the Bijou. Rush Dunkle's choice of films was a disgrace, Mrs. Tolliver proclaimed. Minors should not be allowed in the den of iniquity.

"I would like to hear from Mrs. Pringle on this subject. These gushy an' lusty love movies must be censhured. Mrs. Pringle."

Hattie arose. "Love? It makes the worl' go aroun', girls. Love is all an' all the world knows it. How did you ol' biddies git a husban', huh? You never hid behin' trees with a rope an' a shotgun. Ha, I remember you, Effie, on that hayride about twenty years ago. You had berry juice on your mouth an' poor Hank looked like he'd been tortured by Injuns by the time we got back to town."

"Mrs. Pringle, you are out of order!" yelped Mrs. Tolliver.

"You ain't kiddin', dearie," Hattie said. "An' you'll excuse me as I got to keep a appointment at me hairdresser's. That pitcher at the Bijou was true to life. Wa'n't the widder ravagin', though?"

"Well, I mus' say!" Mrs. Tolliver whooshed out.

"Go ahead," Hattie said, "If you must. I'm fer bigger an' better love pitchers."

WHILE stepping out of the Model T in front of her place of business, she heard a voice that always soured in her ears. Judge Tolliver and three other citizens shuffled up.

"What's this about Jonah an' Asma, huh? No weddin' on the Seventeenth, Hattie? Fer the first time in over fifty y— Godfrey!"

"Milldew," Hattie said. "She will keep the faith. Amen."

"Want to bet?"

"How much, you ol' jaybird?"

"Your prize Brahma bull ag'in that melodeón of mine you been tryin' to git fer the church the last seven years, you ol' fraud!"

'It's a bet," Hattie said and moved along the walk to Madame Marie's Beauty Salon. "Fix me up a lates' hair-to-do, dearie," she said to the proprietor. "Put all the stuff you got in them jars on me kisser, an' I'm in a hurry. Huh, who was that I was talkin' to awhile ago? Wonder what I said to the ol' buzzard?"

"I'll do my best, Hattie, but I dunno!"

"Don't git flip or I'll tell everybody in the country your real name is Lizzie Grift an' you come from Paris, Texas," Hattie sniffed.

An hour later, Hattie Pringle tripped out of the beauty parlor, carrying her old war

bonnet as it would not balance right on her new hair-do. Her unruly brows had been trimmed and she had a simulated pearl on the lobe of each ear. When she walked into her office, Simeon G. Gilpington was already at the table in the corner. He got to his feet and bowed.

"Fer a second I didn't know you, dear lady. You are indeed charmin'!"

Hattie giggled. "You go on, now!"

It was like not being a widow again. The illusion would have been perfect if Simeon had reeked of Old Rum Of The Brush bourbon. Well, Hattie thought, I can make believe Pete took the pledge.

"A rare prize indeed," Simeon observed. "A woman of both brains and pulchritude. In a day or two I shall make a journey into the hills to study the anticlinal ranges, and shall miss this congenial proximity more than you know, ma'am. Er, may I call you Hattie?"

"Hee! Of courst Simeon." Hattie patted her coiffure and coyly dropped her eyes to her lap. Keep still, me fritterin' heart!

Mr. Gilpington tidied his makeshift desk, got up and reached for his hat. He tarried, looked up at Pete and over at Hattie.

"Ah, this was meant to be, Hattie, my dove. It is Kismet."

"Yep, we met but don't go lookin' for no kiss, ha!"

"And a sense of humor ,too," Simeon beamed. "Tell me why nobody has sought your hand, my pet?"

"Maybe 'cause mos' gents aroun' here has felt me foot, Simeon," Hattie snickered.

When she was alone, Hattie finally rounded up the courage to look at her ex-spouse. "Awright," she alibied, "if you lost a lovin' an' faithful airedale an' pined fer him fer years, an' then the dead-spittin' image of him showed up an' follered you home, would you send it yipin' with a kick in the slats? I will put me cards on the table, you ol' stewbum. The love bugs are chewin' me."

Hattie, dispite the semi-coma induced by Cupid's hypo, always said her pa and ma never gave birth to no half-wits, so she ankled over to the Milldew House later to inquire about Simeon Gilpington.

"Paid a week in advance, Hattie," she was told. "Has a roll would choke a bronc. Paid Abbie the chambermaid two dollars awready. Has a razor with chip diamon's in the handle. Abbie says he reads the Good Book every night. I keep astin' myself where I've seen that jasper before, though."

"You been in my office more'n oncet," Hattie chuckled and departed.

SIMEON left Milldew on the stage the next morning. He carried a knapsack, wore an outfit including a Norfolk jacket, knickers, wool stockings and heavy brogans. He was gone for two days and Hattie felt pangs she couldn't even begin to blame on her corns.

"Jus' like Pete was. Went gallivantin' aroun' while a poor gal et out her heart. Gobs, love is worst at my age than when I was sweet sixteen. Sixteen, anyways. I wonder does it show on me."

Hattie was in her office late on the afternoon of Simeon's return. "Ah, it is wonderful to be back," the elderly wooer gushed. "You are more radiant than ever."

She giggled. "Fergit the millarkey, Simeon. You find them anticynical ranges?"

"Perhaps," Simeon replied evasively, and sat down to look over some note papers. It was warm for early spring and soon he took a big blue hanky from his pocket to mop his not so classical pate. Something dropped to the floor and rolled to Hattie's feet and she stooped to retrieve it. Simeon, however, snatched it from her groping fingers.

"A lucky piece, Hattie. No hand but mine has ever touched it."

"No kiddin'? I carried a rabbit's foot oncet, Simeon. Then I et some stew made out of one an' nearly reached the Pearly Gates. So I flang it away. That looked like quartz to me."

"Just a fragment of lava from the glacial period, my dove," Simeon said, and immediately gave the subject the fast brush. "I must go to the hotel and have a nap, Hattie. I—er—wonder if you'd care to go ridin' with me some night soon?"

"Why Simeon—I never—you got your crust—why, of courst," Hattie blurted out, and tingled all over.

Alone once more, she glowed like her weight in fireflies. "I mus' look in a dictionary. He misses my close congenital approximity more'n I know, he said. The ol' rascal is a prospector de luxe, an' has hit pay dirt. This is even more romantic than the pitcher at the Bijou was, an' this time I'm the widder."

Days later all of Milldew was loco over

the romance. Judge Tolliver was indignant. "That fat ol' huzzy!" he griped one evening in the bar of the Milldew House. "She'd even git married to trim me on a bet!"

"You got to hand it to Hattie," a puncher from over by Rattrap Slide opined. "When she says Milldew'll have a weddin' on April Seventeenth, there'll be one. Anyways, Gilpin'ton is a good catch an' is a man of means."

"An' he means business this time, by Judas!"

Simeon did. That night when the Model T was parked out by Sugarloaf Mountain under a washtub moon, he threw his rope.

"Be mine, Hattie. Say you'll be my wife!"

Her hand trapped in both of Simeon's, Hattie Pringle shook like a big load of hay rumbling over a corduroy road. Even though the swain's outburst had been expected, it had the effect of a wooden mallet hitting her in the solo plexus.

"Why, Simeon, I-I—gimme a day or so t' make sure, huh? I been outa practise."

"I'll count the hours, my dove."

Twenty-four of them later, Hattie was cleaning up work that was on her desk when a little citizen came into her office. He wore a checkered suit and a brown derby hat. He was Marvin Tepper, dry goods salesman.

"Jus' hit town, Hattie," Marvin greeted. "How's tricks?"

"You'd never guess, dearie," Hattie snickered.

"Oh, I been hearin' things," Marvin said. "About you an' Gilpin'ton. Congratulations, you ol' sirene! Met the lucky gent oncet over in Piperock Junction. Only one thing wrong with him, Hattie, fer as I can see. Drinks a raw egg with his whisky an' dusts it with cinnamon. Ugh!"

Hattie grabbed Marvin by his nicely pressed lapels and nearly split his store coat up the back. She shoved him away from her and clutched at her throat.

"Open all the winders, M-Marvin. I got t' have air! Oh, great gobs, oh Godfrey-mighty!"

"I'll get a doctor, ol' friend'," Marvin gulped, scared to death.

"Nope, we'll only need a undertaker. Leave me be, Marvin!"

THE drummer beat it. Hattie reeled toward her chair, fell into it, and faced the cold hard facts.

"What a sucker I almos' was! I'm bein' evictimized. Rattlers travel in pairs an' one is Pomeroy Pusey or me name is Henry. Raw eggs an' cinnamon—that hunk of quartz was a decoy!"

Hattie, slowly blowing a gasket, added up. Pomeroy Pusey had been unable to relieve her of a large bundle of dinero, and had told his partner so. Pomeroy had taken a good gander at Poison Pete's picture, had seen the possibilities in it, and had plotted the coup with his bedfellow, Simeon Gilpington. Hombres who worked in double harness long enough fell into the same habits. Like Hen and Crowfoot, yep.

"Awright, you snake lower'n the grass, I'm still the fat ol' fly charmed by the spider. Le's keep playin' games, as I want to see what's in your parlor, you black-gizzarded reperbate!"

When she got home she took a Colt from a gunbelt that hung on her kitchen wall and deposited it in her reticule. She was lacing a cup of coffee with Old Ramroad when a knock sounded on her door.

"I bet it's the mangy timber wolf come fer his answer," Hattie muttered, "I better look all softened up like a freshly greased pair of boots. I'm comi-i-ing," she trilled, and hurried to the door.

It was Simeon. He carried a bouquet of flowers and a box of candy. "Ah, my dove, I could not wait longer. Give me your answer, Hattie, 'fore I succumb from the suspense."

"Yes," Hattie forced out. "Jus, as if you didn' know!" She shoved Simeon away as he tried for a kiss. "Not yet, dearie, ha ha. I'm the ol' fashioned kind. Not until after the weddin'."

Simeon finally got around to more material things. "Might as well own up now, my dove," he said. "That was quartz, yep. Struck somethin' big out in the hills. Vein runs kinda deep an' it'll take some financin' to reach it. I got about ten thousan' but it'll take mebbe that much more. I could approach certain hombres but I'm afraid they'll let the secret out."

"Why, dearie," Hattie appropriately cooed. "Ain't I your pardner? You jus fergit about that exter ten thousan', Simeon. The minute we wed, I'll put it in your han's. How about a guzzle of home-made elderberry?"

Simeon smacked his lips and Hattie knew it was not because of the mention of home brew, and it took all the moxie in her torso

to keep from going for the six-gun in her reticule.

"Got it all planned, Hattie," Simeon purred. "Got a dear brother-in-law is a parson over at New Antioch. Only sixty miles from here. Want him to tie the knot, yep. Then we drive to Piperock Junction an' git a train fer Cheyenne."

Hattie nearly dropped the jug of elderberry. "Why, that is so romantic, Simeon! Of courst I planned to wed here on Darius Milldew Day, but if you insist, whicht you do, awright. I like forcible hombres."

I sabe, you ol' diamond-back, she thought. A fake sky pilot, huh? I give you the legal tender soon's we're on our way. You dump me out of the gas buggy fifty miles from nowheres an' then you gimme the ol' horse laff!

"Here's lookin' at you, dearie," she said aloud. "Mud in your eye, ha!"

"Name the day, Hattie."

"Day after tomorrer, Simeon. I just can't wait!"

"Amen," Simeon said, and drained his tumbler. "I shall run along, my dove. I know you will want to conserve all your energies for the great occasion."

"An' you ain't kiddin'!" Hattie grinned.

Milldew seethed with indignation when Hattie Pringle announced that she would wed with Simeon but not in Milldew. Signs appeared everywhere.

HATTIE PRINGLE TOO GOOD FER MILLDEW!
DON'T COME BACK OR YOU'LL WISH YOU DIDN'T!
GOOD RIDDANTS!
YOU KIN HAVE HER, SIMEON.
WE DON'T WANT HER!

Hattie was leaving her office to take a ride over to the T-Bone ranch when the parade snaked by. A quartette of voices sang:

"Pete Pringle's body is aturnin' in the grave—whi-i-ile the w i d d e r go-o-oes marchin' on! Her eyes have se-e-en the glory of the countin' of the wad. Glory, Glory Hattie fo-o-oled ya-a-a-a-a-! Nya-a-a-a-a-a-a-ah!"

"Oh, gobs, I wisht this was over!"

HATTIE got into her Model T and drove away. A defunct winter storage apple splattered against the windshield as she hit the outskirts in high.

At the T-Bone she sought out Ike Pelky, Absent Tweedy, and Guppy Moser, and conversed with them at length.

"Well, I dunno," Ike grunted. "I drove that hell-wagon only twicet an' it bucked off the road both times, Hattie."

"The third time always tells," Hattie snickered grimly. "You got your orders, Ike. Of courst I don't really need a foreman here, so—"

"Can't you take a joke?" Ike sputtered.

"You git into Milldow tomorrer an' drive this skitterbuggy out. Now I'm goin' to be a bride, I'll be ridin' in one of them fancy-topped towerin' cars with shiny trimmin'."

"Hope you know what you're doin', Boss," Absent Tweedy sighed. "Gittin spliced just to—"

"If I don't I still won't be half as dumb as you, you li'l sassy bullcow," Hattie sniffed. "I'll be gettin' along. And if any of you saddle bums breathes a word, I'll come back an' pull off your arms an' beat out your brains with 'em!"

Simeon Gilpington, wearing Hattie Pringle, all dressed up in her best taffeta, on his arm, climbed aboard the stage that left Milldew at seven-thirty the next morning. All the old shoes, empty tin-cans, and rice that had been boiled showered the departing couple as far as half a mile beyond the town.

"Touchin', huh?" Hattie gulped. "How they loved me there! I know some mortgages'll be foreclosed when an' if I git back, Simeon." She patted her reticule. "I bet you don't know what I got in here, dearie, hee-hee!"

"I bet I do, my pet!" Simeon said. "Our li'l nest egg, my darlin' bride."

'Stop, people are starin', Simeon," Hattie admonished, and cleaned some rice off her puffed sleeve. Oh, I wisht it was over." *Oh, brother!*

The stage stopped for half an, hour at Three Falls, then continued on to New Antioch. At noon, in The Homelike Hotel they had lunch, and just as Hattie was nibbling at an apple dumpling, a tall sober-mienedhombre called out a greeting to Simeon Gilpington.

"Ah, there you are, my dear friend. So this is the blushin' bride? You are certainly a lucky man, Simeon. Yes, indeed."

"The Reverend Oakey T. Pew, my dove," Simeon said.

"Chawmed," Hattie said. "Pew, huh? I

don't figger he could of picked a better n—I mean they got pews in churches yep?"

"Er, Simeon, I find many pressing tasks at hand today," Pew said. "Would you mind if we held the ceremony as soon as you have partaken of your fare? We shall go to my manse and join you both in holy wedlock with quiet dignity."

"I'm sure it is all right with you, my pet?" Simeon asked Hattie.

"I been sayin' I could hardly wait," Hattie giggled. (I ain't just whistlin' Oh, Susanna, neither!)

So they hied to Pew's manse where the knot was supposedly tied.

"—In sickness like in health or till death do us part, forever an' ever, Amen. I pernounce you man an' wife! That'll be twenty dollars, Simeon."

"Thank you, Al—er—Parson," Simeon grinned. "Here's fifty. Worth it fer a prize like I got in that ret—in that taffeta gown, yep. Hattie, le's hire that gas buggy an' git to Piperock Junction. I jus' can't believe it, nope. My li'l dove—"

"You will," Hattie choked out. "I mean it'll seem real when you git all them bills I'll run up every month, ha!"

SIMEON GILPINGTON rented a shiny black touring car with canvas top for the day, or so he made the proprietor of the means of locomotion establishment believe. Twenty minutes later he was driving through the scenic countryside with Hattie Pringle at his side.

"Hope you like the diamon' ring, my pet. Worth maybe half what you got fer me in that—well, I hate to mention money at such a happy time, Hattie, but I'd be happier if—"

"I'm goin' to give it to you right now, Simeon," Hattie said. "Don't look now. Shut your eyes an' open 'em quick when I say ready!"

Simeon did.

"Ready!"

Simeon looked into the meanest end of a big six-gun and both his chins dropped. His hands flew away from the wheel and a partial plate dropped into his lap. Simeon Gilpington's chops turned the color of a bullfrog's vest.

"Wha-a-a-a-a-?"

"Grab that wheel, you ol' crook, or I'll make that fancy vest look like a tea strain-

[*Turn page*]

GIVE ME 10 MINUTES A DAY
LEARN MY TIME TESTED SECRETS OF STRENGTH

I'll teach you the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck the doctors condemned to die at 15, to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! "Progressive Power" has proven its ability to build the strongest, handsomest men in the world. And I stand ready to show you on a money back basis—that no matter how flabby or puny you are I can do the same for you right in your own home. Let me prove I can add inches to your arms, broaden your shoulders, give you a man-sized chest, powerful legs and a Rock-like back—in fact, power pack your whole body so quickly it will amaze you! Through my proven secrets I bring to life new power in you inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied you are the man you want to be.

PROVE IT TO YOURSELF IN ONE NIGHT

Send only 25c for my 5 easy-to-follow, picture-packed courses now in 1 complete volume "How to Become a Muscular He-Man." Try it for one night! Experience the thrilling strength that surges through your muscles.

10 DAY TRIAL!

Think of it—all five of these famous courses now in one picture-packed volume for only 25c. If you're not delighted with this famous muscle-building guide—if you don't actually FEEL results within ONE WEEK, send it back and your money will be promptly refunded!

I am making a drive for thousands of new friends fast—REGARDLESS OF COST!
SO GET NOW MY 5 Muscle Building COURSES (Valued at $5 each)
All in 1 Great Complete Volume
Packed With How-To-Do-It Pictures!
Now, this "get-acquainted," extremely low price of only 25c is your chance to build a body you'll be proud of! Follow Jowett's easy method of muscle building NOW!
For Only 25c

Photo Book of Famous Strong Men! FREE! Photos that inspire you to might and muscle. Free with order.

George F. Jowett Champion of Champions

FREE GIFT COUPON!

Jowett Institute of Physical Culture
230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y. Dept. TP-83

George F. Jowett:—Please send by return mail, prepaid, FREE Jowett's Photo Book of Strong Men, along with all 5 Muscle Building Courses. 1. Molding a Mighty Chest. 2. Molding a Mighty Arm. 3. Molding a Mighty Grip. 4. Molding a Mighty Back. 5. Molding Mighty Legs—Now all in One Volume "How to Become a Muscular He-Man." Enclosed find 25c. NO C.O.D.'S.

NAME ..... AGE.....
(Please Print Plainly. Include Zone Number)

ADDRESS .....

Want more respect?... more opportunities? Then increase your height INSTANTLY with Davis Hite-Builders. Slip them inside your own shoes. Invisible . . . comfortable . . . easy to wear. Made to last for years. Amazingly low-priced!

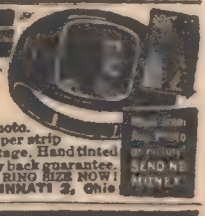
SEND NO MONEY

Rush name, address, and shoe size today. Pay postman only $1.95 plus few cents postage for your pair of Hite-Builders, mailed in plain package. If not delighted with immediate result, just return them and we'll refund your money at once. Or send $1.95 now and save postage. Same guarantee... of course. Order today, look *TALLER* next week!

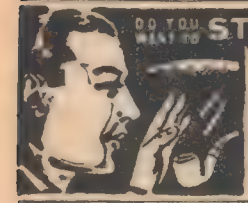
DAVIS MFG. CO.
DEPT. F-340 LOVELAND, OHIO

LAW STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 39 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 85-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

PICTURE RING $1.



Exquisite Picture Ring—made from any photo. **SEND NO MONEY!** Mail photo with paper strip for ring size. Pay postman only $1 plus postage. Hand tinted 25c extra. Photo returned with ring. Money back guarantee.
PICTURE RING CO. SEND PHOTO AND RING SIZE NOW! Dept. A-26, CINCINNATI 2, Ohio



Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.
30 Years in Business
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

Stop Getting Up Nights

TRY THIS FREE

If you get up many times at night due to Irritation of Bladder or Urinary Tract, and have never used PALMO TABLETS we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 20 tablets FREE. If not delighted at the palliative relief received, return the package and you owe us nothing. We mean it. Send No Money. No C.O.D. to pay. Write today and we will send your PALMO TABLETS by return mail postpaid. Address — H. D. POWERS CO., Dept. 329-M, Box 135, Battle Creek, Mich.

er!" Hattie howled. "Egg in your whisky, hah? With cinnamon powder? The Reverent Pew, huh? Bushwash! You was goin' to take me ten thousan' an' dump me out of this buzz-wagon like a ol' sack of spuds, wa'n't you, my dove? Awright, you keep on drivin' to Piperock Junction, sabe? When you git there you'll meet a ol' feller sidewinder who also likes raw eggs in his hootch. Wouldn't be Pomeroy Pusey, would it? You take yer choice, you roomatic Romeo. You either arrive dead or alive!"

"Look, Hattie," Simeon croaked. "So you was too smart fer me. Le's make a deal, huh?"

"I don't hear nobody talkin'!" Hattie ground out. "I kin fergive an' ferget an hombre tryin' to rook me fer me worldly goods, but not fer tryin to lead me astray. I'm a lonesome widder an' helpless—well, not right now, dearie. You should be ashamed toyin' with me affections, you beast! Nope, I won't listen to no preposition. Er, how much heart balm you got on you, Simeon, my pet?"

"Th-three thousan', Hattie. It's all yourn."

"How much has Pomeroy got about now?"

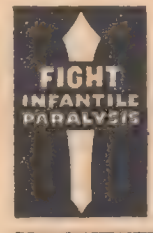
"Not a red, Hattie. He financed me to git your ten thousan'."

"Awright, hand over that dinero whicht rightfully belongs to a gent named Lysander Orping back in Milldew," Hattie snapped. "I'll also take that diamon' stickpin in your tie an' the sparkler on your finger."

"I'll pay off when we git to the Junction, Hattie," the deflated geologist gulped.

Hattie grinned, "Where Pomeroy waits with a hogleg, huh? I bet Pomeroy is hog-tied right now by my T-Bone cowpokes who lef' for the Junction last night. Nope, all is lost, Simeon, me li'l turkle dove. So le's make the deal. You was goin 'to swipe this big jitterbuggy, too. It is me duty to take it back to town. Stop the car, dearie."

Simeon did. At the point of a gun backed



Join the MARCH OF DIMES

JANUARY 15-30

up by the most irked pair of eyes he had ever seen, the swindler emptied his pockets and was soon shorn of his jewelry. Hattie hurriedly inspected the lucre and found it genuine.

"Awright, pet, hit the trail!"

"Look, Hattie, we're in the wilds. You wouldn't set me afoot to starve or die of exposure?" Simeon pleaded.

"You kin either git exposure here or in Milldew in a courthouse, my dove. Whicht will it be? Of courst Pomeroy will be there an' if you are so lonesome fer him, I'll whang you non compus mental an' git you back somehow."

"I'll get out, Hattie. You ain't got no heart, you ol' harrigan!"

"Of courst not. A cad an' a bounder rustled it," Hattie yipped.

Simeon got out of the car helped by a hefty shove of Hattie's foot. The pseudo-bridegroom landed chin first in a clump of soapweed, turned a complete somersault and slid into a shallow creek.

"Kizzmit," Hattie thrust out, and swung

[*Turn page*]

America's Most Entertaining Picture Magazine!

Packed with Fascinating Photo Features!

NOW ON SALE—15c AT ALL STANDS!

False Teeth MAKING YOU A Nervous Wreck?

NEW "NIGHT ACTION" PLASTIC CUSHION

JUST SPREAD ON AT NIGHT—Wake Up with a New, Snug Fit

BETTER than NEW

Dr. Day's DENTAL PLATE LINER

One Easy Application Lasts 3 Months to 1 year

TRY IT ON APPROVAL Send No Money

DON'T PAY UNLESS you Are Delighted

Plate Troubles may not be the fault of your dentist. Shrinking gums or difficult mouths need help. Now, "try-before-you-pay" offer tells you, here is amazing help — more than words can say.

Truly Different — molds itself to mouth crevises to snug, semi-hard cushion fit. NOT A WEAK PASTE — A DELUXE QUALITY PLASTIC — becomes like part of plate. Can be easily removed without harm.

Economical — $2 tube lasts so long it costs most users less than 1½¢ a day. Save money and save mess & bother of pastes, pads, powders.

ODORLESS! TASTELESS! SANITARY!

DAWN OF A NEW DAY for PLATE WEARERS

for UPPERS or LOWERS

No Heating!

Self-Hardening!

Just Spread it On

VALUABLE FREE BOOK with Each Tube

16 pages on HOW TO BETTER CARE FOR, and WEAR PLATES WITH EASE — Includes one page simple directions.

CLIP Coupon NOW

Dr. Day's Dental Plate Liner,
Dept. M3, 601 S. Rampart, Los Angeles 5, Calif.

I want to try your plate liner on approval. If I am pleased, I will mail you $2.00 in cash, money order, or check within 7 days. If I am not pleased, I am free to pay nothing, and will return remainder of tube instead of paying.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

TOWN_____ STATE_____

(Please Print Name and Address)

When PRAYER FAILS

The prayers of the most worthy people often fail. Why? The unworthy often have the greatest health, success, riches and happiness. The best, smartest, and most industrious people often have only pain, poverty and sorrow. Why? Thirty years ago, in Forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman found the answers to these questions. His eyes were opened by the strangest mystic he met during his twenty-one years of travels in the Far East. Sick then, he regained health. Poor then, he acquired wealth and world-wide professional honors. He wants to tell the whole world what he learned, and offers to send a 9,000-word treatise, FREE, to everyone who asks promptly. It is a first step to the POWER that KNOWLEDGE gives. There is no obligation. Write for YOUR FREE COPY today.

INSTITUTE of MENTALPHYSICS, Dept. 14-E
213 South Hobart Blvd., Los Angeles 4, Calif.

High School Course at Home — Many Finish in 2 Years

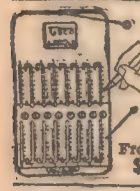
Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-358, Drexel, at 58th, Chicago 37

How to Make Money with Simple Cartoons

A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address FREE BOOK

CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 73 Pleasant Hill, Ohio



ARITHMETIC MADE EASY

Amazing palm-size adding machine does all figuring. Adds, Subtracts, Aids in Multiplication & Division up to $99,999,999. All steel, guaranteed 5 years, fits pocket. Millions in use all over the world. We pay postage on prepaid orders or COD plus postage & charges. Money back if not satisfied. Leatherette case 25c add'l.

Free Trial $2.50 TAVELLA SALES CO. Dp. 243
25 W. Broadway New York 7, N.Y.

If Ruptured Try This Out

Modern Protection Provides Great Comfort and Holding Security

Without Torturous Truss Wearing

An "eye-opening" revelation in sensible and comfortable reducible rupture protection may be yours for the asking, without cost or obligation. Simply send name and address to William S. Rice, Inc., Dept. I-L, Adams, N. Y., and full details of the new and different Rice Method will be sent you Free. Without hard flesh-gouging pads or tormenting pressure, here's a Support that has brought joy and comfort to thousands—by releasing them from Trusses with springs and straps that bind and cut. Designed to securely hold a rupture up and in where it belongs and yet give freedom of body and genuine comfort. For full information—write today!

the hired jalopy around. "See if you taste some substratus residues."

HATTIE PRINGLE practically fell off the stage that chugged into Milldew late the next day. She leaned against the vehicle an' gaped at the brass band giving out with the tune that hailed conquering heroes. A big sign said:

WELCOME BACK, OUR HATTIE!

"I wisht they'd make up their min's," she yelped, then spotted Ike Pelky and Absent Tweedy waddling toward her.

"We got that swindler in jail, Hattie!" Pelky piped. "You let that other owlhoot go?"

"Yep, but I skinned him first," Hattie grinned. "There'll be a weddin' on Darius Milldew Day. I swore I'd guarantee it, huh? Hello, Judge, you kin move that melodeon to the church in time fer Sunday's prayer meetin'. *Hmph*, so you thought I was hooked fer a sucker, did you? Don't answer that, ha!"

An hour later, Hattie managed to get away from the cheering throng, and went to her office and locked the Lumbee-Orping nest egg in her safe. Her old hat dropped down over one eye, she used the other to look up at Pete.

"Awright, you ol' scalawag, I'd git on me knees if I was sure I'd ever git offen'em ag'in. Know the first thing I'm goin to do? Git out an injucture ag'in the Bijou fer puttin ideas in the heads of innercent gals. Are you laffin', you ol' soak?" She moved laboriously over to the picture and gazed fondly up at it.

"I shudder to think what'd happen, Pete, if you'd liked raw aigs in your bug juice," Hattie sniffed. "Well, sleep tight—just as if you could any other way, ha." And still in love, she limped out of the office and closed the door softly behind her.

•

Next Issue

STRAY BELLES

Another Hattie Pringle Howler

By

JOE ARCHIBALD

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 10)

realized it was ridiculous to try to hold one man for wearin' concealed weapons when the witness hisself was guilty o' the same offense. So was every other man in the courtroom, everyone knew.

A Band o' Desperadoes

Then came the night when Duffield was attacked by a band o' desperadoes from Sonora who were operatin' in Arizona at the time. They were thieves and cutthroats, and it was thought they entered the home of Duffield to plunder while he slept. A blow with a hatchet was aimed at the head o' the sleepin man, but for some reason, probably because the attacker was drunk, the blow missed the head and neck but made a terrible gash in the shoulder.

The blow would o' killed some men, but Duffield was a giant in strength, and he sprang from his bed and grappled with his attacker.

With his powerful hands he choked the outlaw, then proceeded to use the man as a weapon to sweep the rest o' the desperadoes out o' the door.

But Duffield had lost a powerful lot o' blood, and he never seemed fully to recover his strength, or be the same man afterwards.

When up and about again he no longer took pleasure in a row, and apparently had no desire to fight left in him. He expressed a wish to live the rest o' his life in peace with all men.

He was killed a few years later by a young man named Holmes, not far from the Contention Mine in Arizona. Holmes had taken up a claim in which Duffield asserted an interest. Seein' Duffield comin' one day, and knowin' the man's reputation of old, the young man leveled a shot-gun at Duffield and warned him not to move another foot.

Duffield took a few steps nearer and Holmes filled him full o' buckshot. A coroner's jury rendered a verdict o' justifiable homicide. They were rememberin' the "old"

[*Turn page*]

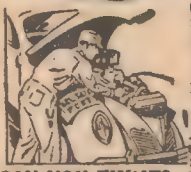
Entertaining Puzzles of Every Variety in

POPULAR CROSSWORD PUZZLES

•

NOW ON SALE — 15c AT ALL STANDS!

AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL



SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of 4 Big, Thick Auto Books. 20th Edition. Over 2700 Pages! Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW
HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

4 BIG THICK VOLUMES

Over 2700 pp., 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

[A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.]

Vocational Publishers Since 1899

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A-349
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

I would like to examine your 4-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

"GET ON Uncle Sam's PAYROLL"

START as high as $3,021 Year

Prepare NOW For Next Examinations

VETERANS GET SPECIAL PREFERENCE

Railway Postal Clerks
City Mail Carriers
City Postoffice Clerks
Stenographers-Typists
Messengers, Etc.
Storekeeper
Gaugers

32-Page Book on Civil Service FREE

Mail Coupon today— SURE

★

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. S94
Rochester 4, N. Y.

Rush to me, entirely free of charge, 32 page book with: (1) A full description of U. S. Government jobs; (2) A list of U. S. Government jobs; (3) Tell me how to prepare for a job.

Name.....

Address.....

.....Vet?.....

HELP KIDNEYS If Back ACHES

Do you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, Bladder Weakness, Painful Passages, or feel old and rundown, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles? If so, try Cystex.

This great medicine, a doctor's formula, has helped thousands of sufferers for over 20 years. Usually the very first dose of Cystex starts to work immediately to help you in these three ways: 1. Helps nature remove irritating excess acids, poisonous wastes and certain germs. 2. This cleansing action helps nature alleviate many pains, aches, soreness and stiffness. 3. Helps reduce frequent night and day calls, thus promoting better sleep.

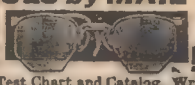
Get Cystex from your druggist today. Give it a fair trial as directed on package. Money back guaranteed unless Cystex satisfies you.

GET EYE-GLASSES by MAIL NEW LOW PRICES

Send No Money!

16-DAY TRIAL Offer

NEWEST STYLES



Send for FREE Scientific Sight Test Chart and Catalog. Write today.

U.S. EYE-GLASSES CO. 1557 MILWAUKEE AVENUE Dept. 3-82, CHICAGO 22, ILL.

Learn PHOTOGRAPHY at Home

Splendid opportunities. Prepare in spare time. Practical basic training. Long-established school. Send for free book, "Opportunities in Photography." No obligation.

American School of Photography, 1315 S. Michigan Ave., Dept. 1803, Chicago 5, Ill.

TOMBSTONES DIRECT TO YOU

Genuine Beautiful **Rockdale Monuments, Markers.** Satisfaction or MONEY BACK. Freight paid. Write for our FREE Catalog and compare prices.

$9.95 up

EASY Terms

ROCKDALE MONUMENT CO.

Dept. 111 JOLIET, ILLINOIS

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 183 State St., Marshall, Mich.

HOT WATER

SHAVE • BATH • WASH

Don't use chilling cold water when instant hot water makes shaving, bathing, washing easier and pleasanter. Just plug into electric 110 AC or DC and you have your instant hot water when and where you want it on our 10-day guarantee. Send no money—just your name and address on postcard. We ship C.O.D. plus few pennies postage. Or we ship postpaid your order if cash accompanies.

MIDWEST MERCHANDISE MART

Dept. 1411 ELKHORN, WIS.

Duffield, and couldn't believe in his changed life and peaceable intentions.

Maybe this goes to show that wild oats are easier to sow than to reap, eh, fellahs and gals?

Letters From Our Readers

SPEAKING of mail reminds me of what happened down in the Panhandle region one time. Seems there was an outlaw named Curly Jones who was a real tough hombre. One day he held up a bank in a little cowtown single handed. Wounded the teller and got away with a considerable amount of cash.

Course the sheriff gathered up a posse and started out after Jones. He was smart though, and even after they had searched for a week they never did find him. Knew him by sight, too, for Jones hadn't even bothered to wear a mask when he held up the bank.

"Reckon that sidewinder is plumb over the Border and deep in Mexico by this time," the sheriff said when he finally rode back into town with a bunch of tired possemen trailing after him. "He's shore gone.

About a week later Curly Jones rides right into town and to the post office. The sheriff and some deputies spot him and he is caught fast without a shot being fired.

"But what I don't see is why yuh were fool enough to come back to this town," said the sheriff, looking at his prisoner puzzled-like. "You mind tellin' me?"

"Shucks," said Curly Jones. "I figured there might be some mail for me at the post office so I just had to come back!"

It just might be that you folks won't believe that yarn, but yuh shore will like all the grand letters we have from members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB.

If there are some of yuh that haven't yet joined the BRANDING FIRE CLUB, then get busy and do it, pronto. Yuh'll find the coupon in this department. All yuh got to do is fill it out and mail it to us with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope so we can send you yore free membership card right away.

Come on, folks, gather around, all of you. Time we got to looking over some of the mighty fine letters we been receiving. Just to be shore to get in as many letters as possible we may cut yore letter down a little—but it's just to save space. And remember we are thanking all of you for writing and joining THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Let's go:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for a good long time. It's a darn good book, no kidding. There are lots of the fellows on this ship that read the magazine so it must be good. I am 19 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall, weigh 157 pounds. Have dark brown hair, brown eyes. Have only one hobby, and that is roller skating. Like to write letters and receive them. At present I am in the Navy. Have been for two years and have ten months to go before I become a civilian.

—Gene Sheller.
U. S. S. HOPPING (APD-51), Florida Group, LantResFleet, U. S. Naval Station, Green Cove Springs, Fla.

I am a young, disabled war veteran. I have to spend a good deal of my time writing and reading. I would like to hear from Americans interested in films, books, music, etc.

—Eric Lumer.
BM/FRVV, London, W. C. 1, England

I think THRILLING RANCH STORIES is tops. I am 19 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall, and weigh 125 pounds. I have black hair and brown eyes. I love all outdoor sports, and especially enjoy good Western music. I'm awfully lonesome now, anyone and everyone please write, All letters answered immediately.

—Virginia Young.
Box 376, Oak Grove, Oregon.

[*Turn page*]

NOW ON SALE!

YOUR STAR GUIDE FOR THE ENTIRE YEAR!

•

ONLY 15c AT ALL STANDS

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides

4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

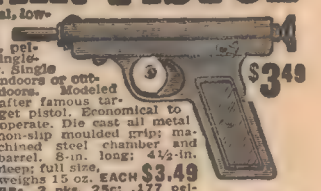
Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ PAL

3 In 1 AIR PISTOL



SPORTSMAN JR.—Sensational, low-priced air pistol. Ruggedly built, full size target gun shoots either standard BBs, pellets or steel darts. Fast, single-action compression chamber. Single shot, silent shooting. Use indoors or outdoors. Modeled after famous target pistol. Economical to operate. Die cast all metal non-slip moulded grip; machined steel chamber and barrel. 8-in. long; 4½-in. deep; full size, weighs 15 oz. EACH $3.49 BBs, 3 pks. 25c; .177 pellets, 500 for $1.50; steel darts, 35c package. Order Plenty of Ammunition.

$3.49

Shoots BBs Darts Pellets

No C.O.D.

JOHNSON SMITH & COMPANY, Dept. B-37, Detroit 7, Michigan

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. **More Ability: More Prestige: More Money** We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48 page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 3329-L Chicago 5, Ill.

BE A *Nurse*

LEARN AT HOME

Practical nurses are needed in every community... doctors rely on them... patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 49th yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women, 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 422, 100 East Ohio Street, Chicago, 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.

Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

Fit-Rite makes False Teeth TIGHT

Makes loose dental plates fit snugly and comfortably. LASTS for MONTHS!

Simply squeeze on dental plate and put it in your mouth. Hardens and becomes part of plate. Money-back guarantee.

FREE Generous package of Dental Plate Cleanser with each order. Send $1.00 or mailed parcel post collect.

Fit-Rite Co., 1373 Milwaukee Ave. Dept. 3-82, Chicago, Ill.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write to GEO. R. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

OUTDOOR JOBS

Study for park ranger, game refuge and forestry work. Details free. Write DELMAR INSTITUTE, D4, Denver, Colo.

OLD LEG TROUBLE

Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.

T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn Street, Chicago 2, Illinois

What Every Mason Wants

We have Important Masonic books for Blue Lodge, Chapter, Commandery, Scottish Rite, and Shrine.
OUR RITUALS ARE USED THE WORLD OVER
Send for free catalog of books and rituals for Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Knights of Columbus, etc.
EZRA A. COOK, Publisher, P. O. 796, GM, Chicago 90, Ill.

What To Do For Pains of
ARTHRITIS
Try This Free

If you have never used "Rosse Tabs" for pains or arthritis, neuritis, rheumatism, we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 24 Tabs FREE. If not astonished at the palliative relief which you enjoy from your sufferings, return the package and you owe us nothing. We mean it! SEND NO MONEY. Just send name and address and we will rush your Tabs by return mail. ROSSE PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 208, 2708 Farwell Ave., Chicago 45, Illinois.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for two years and think it is a grand magazine. I am 21 years old 5 feet 3 inches tall and weigh 117 pounds. Have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are dancing, good music and movies. I hope some day to become a good fiction writer. I would like to meet some new friends though I already have some.

—L. J. Tucker.

Peoria, 2, Ill.

I certainly enjoy reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I am 22 years old, six feet tall, weigh 150 pounds and have reddish brown hair and blue eyes. I like all outdoor sports, and will be glad to answer all letters I receive.

—Robert Wilson.

R. F. D. 1, Mountain City, Tenn.

I am 30 years old, 5 feet 8 inches tall, weigh 145 pounds and have brown hair and blue eyes. I was raised on a cow ranch near Del Rio, Texas. Punched cows for fifteen years before I came to California, and now I'm doing electrical work. Have been in twenty-eight states and can write some very interesting letters about the West to anyone interested. Will try to answer all letters received.

—James M. Lee, Jr.

General Delivery, Turlock, California.

Several months ago I was unfortunate enough to suffer a broken leg, during a parachute jump. Consequently I was confined to a hospital for a long time. While in the hospital I became acquainted with your wonderful magazine, THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I want to express my everlasting gratitude for the enjoyment I received by reading your exciting stories. Since my accident I've been handicapped somewhat and have spent many lonely hours. I would like to start a correspondence and faithfully promise to answer all letters received. I am 22 years old, 5 feet ten inches tall, weigh 170 pounds. Have dark brown wavy hair, gray eyes, and enjoy football, swimming and dancing.

—Sgt. Guy Rehman.

82nd Pacht Mount Co., 82nd Airborne Div., Fort Bragg, N. C.

I am 22 years old, have green eyes, brown hair, and a nice smile. I work every day in a doctor's office. My hobbies are fishing, outdoor sports, and I also like horses.

—Betty Boyce.

6403 Dicks Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.

I'm a blonde of 22, and am 5 feet 6 inches tall and weigh 135 pounds. I have gray-blue eyes. My hobbies are roller skating, hunting and fishing. I'm also a regular reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I promise to exchange snapshots and answer all letters. Please someone

—Dale Flickenger.

Box 155, Opheim, Montana.

I am 16 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall, have dark brown hair and eyes. My favorite hobbies are collecting snapshots and writing letters, so come on everybody, write to me.

—Syndonia Patschke.

3907 Barnes Street, Houston, 7, Texas.

I am 17 years old, have brown hair, brown eyes and am 5 feet 5½ inches tall. I have spent all my life in Texas. I like all outdoor sports, but my favorite is riding horses. I also enjoy writing and receiving letters, and finding new pen pals. I promise to answer all letters.

—Betty Jo McWilliams.
Route 2, Poolville, Texas.

I am a lonely girl of 17. Have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are writing, collecting souvenirs, cooking, movies, basketball games. Would like to hear from anyone. Will answer every letter I receive.

—Valaria June Coen.
922 Hazlett Street, Anderson, Indiana.

I am a Newfoundland girl away from home, and lonely. I am 29 years old, my hair is long and brown, my eyes brown. I am 5 feet 2 inches tall and weigh 100 pounds. My favorite hobby is housekeeping and I like dancing. Will exchange snapshots and I promise to answer all letters.

—Kay Lawlor.
35 Weymouth Street, Charlottetown, P. E. I., Canada.

I am 25 years old, 5 feet 5½ inches tall, dark brunette, am married and have three small sons. My hobbies are collecting authentic data, newspaper clippings and articles on the American Indian, and colored picture postal cards of the 48 states. I enjoy walking, dancing and reading.

[*Turn page*]

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

THE WATER IS MINE

An Exciting Rangeland Novelet

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

•

THE TALKING WIRES

A Complete Romantic Novelet

By L. P. HOLMES

•

THE GHOSTS OF BUCKSKIN RUN

A Swift-Moving Action Novelet

By JIM MAYO

PLUS MANY OTHER SMASHING YARNS!

Appear SLIMMER
Look YOUNGER
Feel BETTER
Instantly!

Don't let them talk about your "Bay Window"—stay slenderized with this amazing free-action, ever comfortable, elastic woven garment!

"INTERLOCKING HANDS" PRINCIPLE
Clasp hands over abdomen, as in picture—raise and press gently—notice how much better you feel! Sturdy non-stretch fabric is BUILT IN with the stretchy weave of the Commander for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT across the abdomen. Instantly the Commander flattens your "Corporation"—BRACES YOUR BACK—improves your appearance!

TRY IT 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE
COMMANDER has real man's completely detachable athletic type pouch. Takes just a moment to detach for washing or replacing with another. Gives GENUINE male protection. Send coupon—wear the Commander TEN DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE—if you do not get all the results you expect, return it and YOUR MONEY WILL BE REFUNDED.

MAIL COUPON NOW

Ward Green Company, Dept. L293
113 W. 57th St., New York 19, N. Y.

Send me Commander Supporter for Free Trial. I will pay postman $2.98 plus postage. (Sizes 28 to 47.) If not satisfied I may return it in 10 days and get money back. (Sizes 48 to 60, $3.98.)

My Waist Measures.....My Height.....

Name .....

Address .....

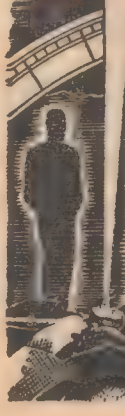
If $2.98 is enclosed with order, we pay postage charges. ☐ Check here.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

● Prepare for the big earning power of **Diesel Trained Men.** Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. When home course is completed, you come to Chicago for actual shop practice on DIESEL MOTORS under expert instructors, at UEI's fine, modern school.

BEGIN AT ONCE—GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!

DIESEL DIVISION **UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE**
2521 Sheffield Ave., Dept. 1038-D, Chicago 14, Illinois



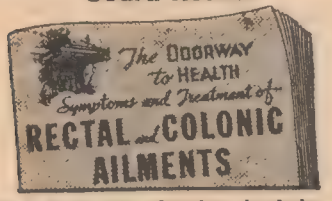
A SPLIT SECOND IN ETERNITY

Can we experience *momentary* flights of the soul? The ancients called it *Cosmic Consciousness*—the merging of man's mind with the Universal Intelligence. Not a religious idea. Learn the simple natural laws for receiving inner joy and power. Write for FREE book *today*. Address: Scribe A.D.A.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)
San Jose • California

Dangers Of Delay On Chronic Ailments

FREE BOOK — Tells How To Help Guard Health



Many facts about colon disorders, headaches, constipation, nervousness or stomach, liver and bladder conditions are explained in a new 40-page FREE BOOK. Write today. Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 356, 926 McGee Street, Kansas City, Mo.

SUIT YOURS

AND BIG MONEY IN SPARE TIME, TOO

We want you to wear this fine made-to-measure suit! Make it yours by sending a few orders, & earn BIG CASH PROFITS in spare time. Your suit will help you get more orders with scores of rich, quality fabrics, tailored-to-measure to newest styles. Also Ladies' Tailored Suits—complete line. Write today for **FREE SAMPLES** NO EXPERIENCE, no money needed. For quick action tell us about yourself.

J. C. FIELD & SON, INC.

Harrison and Throop Sts. Dept. C-1877 Chicago 7, Ill.

Thrilling Work COLORING PHOTOS

EASY TO LEARN

Fascinating vocation learned at home by those with aptitude. Thrilling pastime. National method brings out life-like colors. Free booklet.

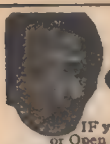
NATIONAL PHOTO COLORING SCHOOL
1315 S. Michigan, Dept. 1803, Chicago 5

IMPERFECT DIAMONDS

Unusual bargains in dazzling genuine diamonds which have slight imperfections. However, these do not mar the eye beauty of the gems, nor lessen their everlasting flash and fire! You will be amazed at the *low prices*.

Write for FREE catalogue.

Address: **DIAMOND DIVISION,**
Box 388, Dept. S, Wheeling, W. Va.



Suffer Varicose LEG SORES?

IF you suffer pain and misery of Varicose Ulcers, or Open Leg Sores, send away at once for FREE Booklet "THE LIEPE METHODS FOR HOME USE." Tells all about this 40-year-old method, praised and endorsed by thousands. **Liepe Methods, Dept. 33-C, 3284 N. Green Bay Ave., Milwaukee, Wisconsin.**

Free for Asthma During Winter

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation of temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Caution! Use only as directed. Address

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 458-B FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

I love to write and receive letters and would like to hear from men and women married or single who will tell me about the west and southwest. I promise faithfully to answer all letters I receive and will exchange photos of myself and picture postcards.

—*Mrs. Margaret Feger.*
303 Sycamore St., Buffalo, 4, N. Y.

I have read THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and think it is a swell magazine. I think it would be kinda nice to join the BRANDING FIRE CLUB, as I'm a shut-in, I'd say, since I don't get to go anywhere. So I would like to hear from many boys and girls of all ages. I am a Sioux Indian from the Rosebud Indian Reservation. My Sioux name is Crazy Bull. I am 22 years old, 5 feet 5 inches tall—I like to collect songs, pictures of cities and state historic scenes. Hope to hear from you all.

—*Armands Moreno.*
P. O. Box 807, Rapid City, So. Dakota.

Reckon that's about all we'll have room for this time, but we shore are thanking everybody for writing and we'll be using more of yore fine letters in the next issue. And here's a list of some folks who are new BRANDING FIRE CLUB members:

Herman E. Pelphart, 806 Quietman Street, Denver, Colo.
Mrs. Jewel Drake, Route 3, Box 510, Beaumont, Texas.
Harold F. Chandler, General Delivery, Britton, Okla.
Arthur Graefsky, 2228 Palm Ave., Los Angeles, 16, California.
Angie Ostanek, 306 East 56th Street, New York, 22, N. Y.
Eileen Allen, Ferryville, Wisconsin.
Miss Vynski Irving, W.L.A. Hostel, Brockington Grange, Bredenbury, Herefordshire, England.
Alice Shaner, Box 590, Idamay, West Virginia.
Betty Jo Hood, 327 Emory Street, Harriman, Tenn.
Dan Aitkin, 5754 Waverly St., Montreal, Que., Canada.
Irene Ressler, Route 2, Box 138, Crosby, Texas.
Leona Lee Cloud, Box 896, Roundup, Montana.
Stella Stockdale, Prescott, Michigan.
Joy Olson, Lawence, Que., Canada.
Ralph E. Kierstead, Jr., 8 Custom St., Eastport, Maine.
Elizabeth Pitcher, 124 Bassick Court, Stratford, Conn.
Floyd Lowe, Russellville, Ala.
Betty Lou Conner, R. R. 1, Richfield, Idaho.
Betty Gillespie, Box 199, Fort Bragg, California.
Sonny Roads, R. F. D. 2, Sallis, Miss.
Erma Lee, 500 East 7th Street, Sheffield, Alabama.
Mr. P. S. Compton, Box 196, Jacksonville, Texas.
Joyceline Teske, R. R. 1, Buckingham, Quebec, Canada.
Mary Addison, Route 5, Centralia, Ill.
Billy Camp, 1042 Water Street, Moosic, 7, Penna.
Sergeant Leo S. Burakowski, 1129 M. P. Co., A. P. O. c/o P. M. San Francisco, California.
Mary Lu Knisley, Yonges Island, S. C.
Mr. J. W. Moore, Route 1, Searcy, Arkansas.
Eliott T. Holt S2/c Communications, U. S. Naval Air Facilities, Attu, Alaska.
Twillie Powell, 3400 Newton Street, Denver, 11, Colorado.
Bob Kerr, Box 524, Star City, Arkansas.
Lorna Delong, Hensonville, N. Y.
Edna Suanger, Route 5, Box 197, High Point, N. C.
Arthur Green, Eighty Four, Pa.
Betty Lillman, Box 18, Ulster, Pa.
James M. Langley, c/o Heard's Cafe, De Quincy, Louisiana.
Jose Dumond, Box 52, Perry, Louisiana.
Trudy Sprenkle, 239 So. Marshall St., Lancaster, Pa.
Charles Ward, Rt. 4, c/o C. B. Hester, Brownfield, Texas.
T. M. Howard, 313 West 33rd Street, New York, N. Y.
Lucille Smithson, P. O. Box 107, Chandler, Arizona.

Mrs. Margaret Feger, 303 Sycamore St., Buffalo, 4, N. Y.
Paul Rhine, Box 26, Lock Haven, Pa.
Faye Cook, Box 131, Hawley, Texas.
Madge Deatherage, Three Brothers, Ark.
James E. Helton, H. C. No. 2, Richmond, Texas.
Gladys M. Chapman, Orkney, Sask., Canada.
Warren H Hensen, 201 S. Main, Jacksonville, Ill.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

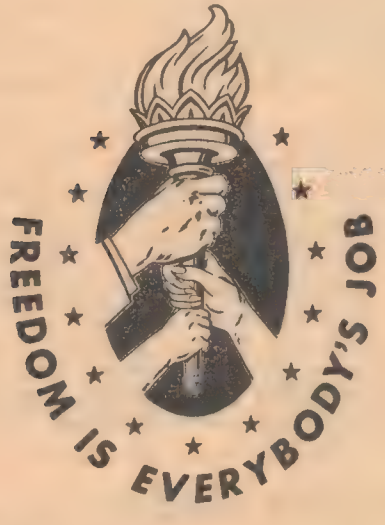
YES, Sir! I'm feelin' as popular as a chuck wagon cook round about evening in roundup time. When yuh ride into camp after a long hard day of working with cow critters feelin' hungry and tired the smell of a good meal cooking shore sets a man up.

"They are just that," I says to nobody in particular, as I am sitting at my desk at the office thinking. "A fiction feast."

"Meaning the stories for the next issue, I suppose," says the boss, who always seems to be around when I get talkin' out loud that way. "Then suppose you serve the folks the menu, Tex."

"The what?" I ask, being a hombre whose education has been sort of sadly collected.

[*Turn page*]



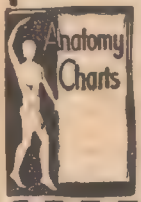
Get Aboard
THE FREEDOM TRAIN
Coming Your Way!

Learn this Profitable Profession

IN 90 DAYS AT HOME

MONEY-MAKING CAREER OPEN to MEN and WOMEN, 18 to 50

Hundreds of men and women between 18 and 50 make $10 to $20 in a single day giving Scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is big demand from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums and clubs. Graduates earn large full time incomes from these or in private practice in their own offices. Others make good money from home treatments given in spare time. Learn this interesting, money-making profession in your own home, through our home study course. Same instructors as in our nationally known resident school. You can win independence and prepare for future security by qualifying for our Diploma. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. Many earn while they learn. Begin your training at once.



Anatomy Charts & Booklet FREE

Enroll now and we will include, at no extra cost, many needed supplies. Fit yourself to help meet growing demand for Scientific Swedish Massage. Send the coupon at once for complete details. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Booklet. FREE, postpaid.

THE COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE
Dept. 863-C, 100 East Ohio St., Chicago 11, Illinois
Please send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, 32-page Booklet and complete details on Home Training.

Name.....
Address.....
City.....State.....

YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!

Help Bring Crooks to Justice Through Scientific
CRIME DETECTION!

We have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let us teach you *in your own home.* Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Indentification, Police Photography, Secret Service Methods thoroughly, quickly, at small cost. Over 800 of all American Bureaus of Identification employ I. A. S. students or graduates. We can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time. Write today, stating age, for "Blue Book of Crime."

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7963, Chicago 40, Ill.

LEARN MEAT CUTTING At Home—In Spare Time

Get into the vital meat industry. Concise, practical Home Training based on 25 years proven instruction method used at National's famous resident school. Prepares you for bigger pay as Meat Cutter, supervisor, market manager or more money in your own store. Go as rapidly as your spare time permits. Diploma. Start NOW to turn your spare hours into money. Send for FREE bulletin today. No obligation.
National School of Meat Cutting, Inc., Div. TG-29, Toledo 4, Ohio

DETECTIVES

Home Study in Detective Training—Professionally Modernized—Recognized Instructors—Easy Payments—Write:
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701-T Monroe St., N. E. Washington 18, D. C.

STERLING SILVER
LADY LUCK HORSE SHOE Ring

Statuesque Horse's head, horse shoe and 4-Leaf Clover design. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver. Oxidized, hand-buffed finish. Styled for men or women.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip ad and mail with name, address and ring size. Pay postman only $3.98 (tax included) plus postage. Wear for 5 days. If not delighted, return for full refund.
Western Craftsmen Dept. 506B 3904 Farnam Omaha 2, Nebr.

SEND FOR THIS *FREE* BOOK NOW!

● Increase your earning power. Become *thoroughly* trained in a well-paid profession. Without obligation, find out about the opportunities in Electrical, Mechanical, Plastics, Civil, Mining and other engineering fields. Our *free* 118-page handbook, lists details of home study courses, compiled by world authorities. See for yourself how you can soon earn more dollars. Write today, to: Canadian Institute of Science and Technology, Ltd., 442 Century Building, 412, 5th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Details of over 60 home study courses based on standard textbooks.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW

Canadian Institute of Science & Technology, Ltd., 442 Century Building, 412, 5th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Please forward free of cost or obligation of any kind your 118-page handbook "Engineering Opportunities".

Name..... Age.....

Address .....

CANADIAN ENQUIRIES: 219 Bay Street, Toronto 1.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Thrilling Ranch Stories, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1947. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Thrilling Ranch Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1947. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1948.

"The menu—the bill-o-fare," says the boss. "To put it so that even you can understand. Tell the readers about the collection of splendid stories we have lined up for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES."

Such being the case I reckon I had better start doing that right now, so here goes.

First comes THE WATER IS MINE, a dramatic novelet by Allan Vaughan Elston. Seems that Josie Gordon's father had been killed in a gunfight by a water-grabbing neighbor named Buck Ballard. Ballard claimed he had shot Gordon in self-defense, and there were no witnesses to prove otherwise.

Josie Gordon was determined to run the ranch she now owned, in spite of Buck Ballard and no water. So she came back to the ranch, apparently as the widow of the youngest of three dangerous outlaws. The local sheriff was suspicious, but not too bright. However young Jerry Bidwell, the new district attorney, wasn't easy to fool. He proved it right away, but all the same he liked Josie and aimed to help her out in his own way.

When Buck Ballard learned of Josie's connection with the Dodson brothers he was scared, and stopped stealing water and cutting fences right then. But Jerry and Josie knew that if he ever found out the truth, or the two remaining outlaw brothers should be killed or captured, it would mean plenty of trouble for the girl who was running the ranch.

Then one day the Dodson brothers did show up—and what happened then makes THE WATER IS MINE a story packed with suspense and action from start to finish!

Next is THE TALKING WIRES, a pulsating novelet by L. P. Holmes. Jim Marvin was the station agent at Ravensdale Gap, and his daughter Connie had been born there. Since she had grown up Connie had been able to handle a telegraph key even better than her father did. She was a right pretty girl, but all the same she didn't like Rick

Be Extra Careful This Year!

ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT
FOREST FIRES!

Dalton and Turk LeRonde getting into a fist fight over her.

Rick apologized to Jim Marvin and Connie about the fight before he left to go East with a shipment of cattle, and the station agent and his daughter forgave the young waddy.

When a cattle dealer was killed and robbed and Rick's knife was found at the scene of the crime, it shore looked bad for him. Town Marshal Pete Lilly arrested Rick and took him to jail. There was a lot of angry talk going around, for the dead cattle buyer had been well liked.

Before long Turk LeRonde and a couple of his pards were stirring up a mob. Connie realized that to help Rick she had to get word to his outfit, and the J 4 ranch was miles away. How she did get word to the ranch, and how Rick got the man who caused all the trouble, is told in THE TALKING WIRES—a humdinger of a yarn that will hold you breathless!

The third long yarn in the next issue is THE GHOSTS OF BUCKSKIN RUN, an exciting novelet by Jim Mayo. It shore was a shock to Loma Day, bound for Cordova on

[*Turn page*]

Read Our Companion Western Magazines!

TRIPLE WESTERN
GIANT WESTERN
THRILLING WESTERN
TEXAS RANGERS
RODEO ROMANCES
WEST
POPULAR WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
THE RIO KID WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN

•

Now On Sale At All Stands!

Refit and Tighten FALSE TEETH

With AMAZING PLASTI-LINER

If your plates are loose and slip and hurt; reline them better than new, with this pliable, non-porous strip. **Just lay on plate, bite and it molds perfectly,** hardens for permanent fit and comfort. Ends forever the mess, bother, expense, of temporary applications that last only a few hours or few months. PLASTI-LINER is tasteless and odorless. Will not injure plates. **Guaranteed to give satisfaction or your money back.**

Easy-To-Use Plastic Strips
Re-Fit False Teeth Perfectly

Here's what users say: "Until I used PLASTI-LINER I used several kinds of liners without success. Now I can eat anything." H.S.M. "My plates now fit **better than when new.**" E.H.C.

SEND NO MONEY Just order a $2.25 package to reline both upper and lower plates or $1.25 for one plate. Deposit the money with your postman when it arrives, or send money now and **save C.O.D. charges.** Trial size plate cleaner *free.*

PLASTI-LINER CO., Dept. 47B, Buffalo 2, N.Y.

TRIM YOUR OWN

TRIM HAIR AT HOME—SAVE BARBER BILLS

Trims hair as it combs! Easy! Quick! Keeps men's, women's, children's hair trim, neat, freshly-cut looking all the time! Trims, tapers, thins out uneven hair. Use like ordinary comb. Safe. Simple. No experience required. Fine for legs, underarms! *Sells Like Wild!*

SAMPLES for AGENTS

Sample offer sent immediately to all who send name at once. Penny postal will do. SEND NO MONEY. *Just your name.* **KRISTEE CO.**
1473 BAR ST., AKRON, OHIO

Learn to MOUNT BIRDS
Tan SKINS, make up FURS

Be a Taxidermist. *Double your hunting fun.* We teach you **at Home.** Mount **Birds, Animals, Fish, Heads,** common specimens. **Fun and profits.** Decorate home and den **MAKE MONEY.** Mount game, tan for others. Big profits in spare time. **WRITE TODAY.**

100 game pictures in FREE BOOK
Hunters, get your copy. It's **FREE Now Free.** Send post card. State your AGE.

FREE BOOK
NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY
Dept. 4173 Omaha, Nebraska

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."
National Baking School, 1315 Mich. Ave., Dept. 1803, Chicago 5

SEND FOR THIS FREE!

HOW to BREAK and TRAIN HORSES

Make money with horses. Every farmer, every lover of horseflesh should have a copy of this booklet. If you want to know how to break, train and make money with horses, *write today for full information FREE,* together with my special offer of a course in Animal Breeding. If you are interested in Gaiting and Riding the saddle horse check here. ☐ *Do it today—now. You'll never regret it.*

BEERY SCHOOL OF HORSEMANSHIP
Dept. 823 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

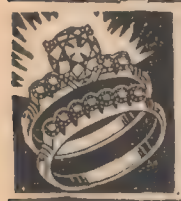
EASY NEW METHOD
SHOWS HOW TO
PLAY GUITAR IN 2 WEEKS
TRY IT ON
MONEY-BACK OFFER

45 PHOTOS show exactly where to put your fingers
101 SONGS words & music INCLUDED!

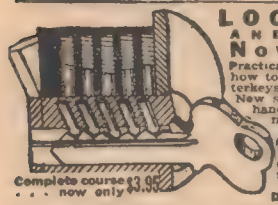
Now 'et Bob West, radio's favorite guitar player, show you how! Most "Courses" have only 5 or 8 pictures—but Bob's new method has 45 actual photographs! It not only teaches but shows exactly where and how to place your fingers, etc. Most others offer a few songs—Bob provides 101!—chosen for their radio popularity so you can sing and play right along with your favorite radio program or records!

SEND NO MONEY: Just send name and address to Bob West and pay postman $1.69 plus COD and postage. Start playing beautiful chords the very first day. Be playing beautiful music in two weeks or get your money back.

BOB WEST, Dept. TF, 1101 N. Paulina, Chicago 22, Ill.



IMITATION DIAMOND RINGS
$1.95 each or both for $3.50
Beautiful Solitaire and Wedding ring set with brilliant imitation diamonds in Yellow Gold-Plate or Sterling Silver.
SEND NO MONEY
Pay Postman on delivery plus 20% Federal Tax and postage on Money-Back Guarantee.
CLARK RING CO.
Dept. 749 Box 5151 Chicago 80



LOCKSMITHING AND KEY MAKING
Now Made Easy!
Practical up-to-date course teaches you how to pick locks, de-mode, make masterkeys, repair, install, services, etc. New self-instruction lessons for every handyman, a homeowner, carpenter, mechanic, service station operator, fix-it shop, hardware dealer, gunsmith. 53 easy illustrated lessons. Full price only $3.95 postpaid; or C.O.D., plus postage. Satisfaction or refund guaranteed.
Complete course $3.95 . . . now only $3.95
Nelson-Hall Co., 1139 S. Wabash, Dept. C06, Chicago 5.

Many Users Say They
GROW HAIR
IT STIMULATES GROWTH OF HAIR
Yes—today you may find relief from baldness, falling hair. Many report remarkable results. New war formula—guaranteed. Satisfied customers' names supplied on request. Money back if not satisfied.
Send anywhere Cash or C.O.D. Price Per Jar Including Tax $10
LA-SAN LABORATORIES Dept. TF
1219 N. Longacre Blvd., Yeadon, Pa.

MAKE THIS SUIT YOURS NEW PLAN
EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS!
Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to $10, $12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation!
PIONEER TAILORING CO. Congress and Throop Streets, Dept. C-1277, Chicago 7, Ill.

the ~~over~~land stage, to be told by her fellow passengers that the man she was coming West to marry was a murderer.

However there was another side to the story. Rod Morgan, the man Loma loved, had found that folks didn't like him living in Buckskin Run. They claimed the place was haunted. But Rod figured they were just too anxious to get him away from that region.

Staying right where he had built his little cabin meant gun-trouble for Rod, but he was willing to risk it in this engrossing novelet. You'll enjoy every moment of THE GHOSTS OF BUCKSKIN RUN.

Also look forward to GOLDEN NEST-EGG, by Barry Scobee, a deeply human story in which young Joe Ellston finds gold—and an orphan girl—and battles to keep the cabin from being taken over by a greedy rival. It's an appealing yarn.

There will also be a number of carefully-selected short stories and interesting features in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, all of them filled with the adventurous spirit of the rangeland. See you all then, folks!

—TEX BROWN.

THRILLING RANCH STORIES
10 East 40th Street,
New York 16, N. Y.

DEAR TEX: Please enroll me as a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB and send me my membership identification card. I agree to be active in keeping the Branding Fire burning.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State ..... Age .....

Favorite Hobbies .....

I am enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope in which you are to mail my membership card.

Signed .....

Date .....

Foreign readers are required to send International Reply Coupons or American Stamps 3-48

The Enemy Is Here

A Message to All Americans

By KATE SMITH

OUR orators, journalists, and statesmen have taken "preparedness" as a favorite theme these days. But little do the people of America realize that our greatest enemy is already entrenched within our gates. I am referring to heart disease, this nation's Number One Killer. As a call to action to defend the health of our citizens against this enemy, the American Heart Association has designated the week of February 8-14, 1948, as National Heart Week.

Let us not think of this as "just another week" or confine our cooperation to certain space on the calendar. Let us realize that the defense of our country depends first and foremost on the health and well-being of all the people of these United States.

As a nation we have been alarmingly complacent in the face of this leading public health problem. Every minute of every twenty-four hours in this nation, some man, woman or child dies of diseases of the heart and blood vessels, which we commonly lump together under the general term, "heart disease."

The victims include men and women in the prime of their lives—their forties and fifties—the years of their greatest fulfillment and productivity. These are stricken by hyper-tensive heart disease and coronary thrombosis. In them the country loses many of the best brains, the most experienced minds of today, in an era when men and women of ability and vision are so sorely needed. I am speaking also of children who in every nation are the hope of tomorrow. Rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease cause more deaths among American children than the next five leading causes combined.

The important question is: What are we doing about this enemy on the home front?

To date the answer is appalling: We are doing very little. In terms of money alone, the American public spends least for the fight against this greatest killer. In other avenues of attack also, we are only making a start.

But the plan of attack has been formulated. The American Heart Association—located at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, New York—whose members include America's leading heart specialists, urges every conscientious citizen to enlist in the war on heart disease.

Medical science has made great progress in diagnosis and treatment. But many thousands of men, women and children do not get the benefits of the latest advances in this field. It is our duty, in defense of our country, to help the American Heart Association to bring the best that medical science has to offer within reach of all Americans.

DRAW for MONEY!

Be An ARTIST!

Trained Artists are Capable of Earning $30, $60, $75 a Week

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING all in ONE complete home study course. No previous Art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. TWO ART OUTFITS furnished. Full information in FREE BOOK. "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today.

State age.—COURSE G.I. APPROVED.

FREE BOOK gives details

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 663-M, 1115 15th St., N. W.
Washington 5, D. C.

Name.....
Street.....Age.....
City.....Zone ( ) State.....

ITCHY

Checked in a JIFFY

Relieve itching caused by eczema, athlete's foot, scabies, pimples and other itching conditions. Use cooling, medicated D.D.D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Soothes, comforts and checks itching fast. 35c trial bottle proves it—or money back. Don't suffer. Ask your druggist today for D.D.D. Prescription.

$$--BELIEVE IN LUCK?--$$

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a Pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims. $1.97 Postpaid for the two, with all information. $1.97 and 27c extra if C.O.D. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

ASTROL CO., Dept. M-827, Main P. O. Box 72, BROOKLYN, N. Y.

NOTICE! Beware of imitations! We absolutely GUARANTEE these Genuine Brahma Lodestones are ALIVE! We believe they are just what you want, the REAL THING—POWERFUL DRAWING, EXTRA HIGHLY MAGNETIC! Fully Guaranteed. Copyright 1937—A. Co.

GUM GRIPPER Tightens FALSE TEETH or NO COST

Lasts from 3 to 6 Months!

New discovery makes loose dental plates fit snug and comfortable for months—almost like having your own teeth again. For uppers and lowers.

Easy to Apply at Home... Simply squeeze some "GUM GRIPPER" evenly on your denture, put plate in your mouth where it sets and hardens in few minutes. No heat—no fuss—no muss. Will not harm any denture.

SEND NO MONEY...

Order a tube today, for only $1.00 (deposit with your own postman). Each application of "GUM GRIPPER" guaranteed to last from 3 to 6 months and delight you completely or your money will be cheerfully refunded.

GUM GRIPPER, INC.
127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. 50B, Chicago 12, Ill.

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $3,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

Write For This Free Book

For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

Over 2300 Certified Public Accountants among LaSalle alumni

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

417 South Dearborn Street, Dept. 3329-H Chicago 5, Illinois

I want to be an accountant. Send me, without cost or obligation, the 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays," and full information about your accountancy training program.

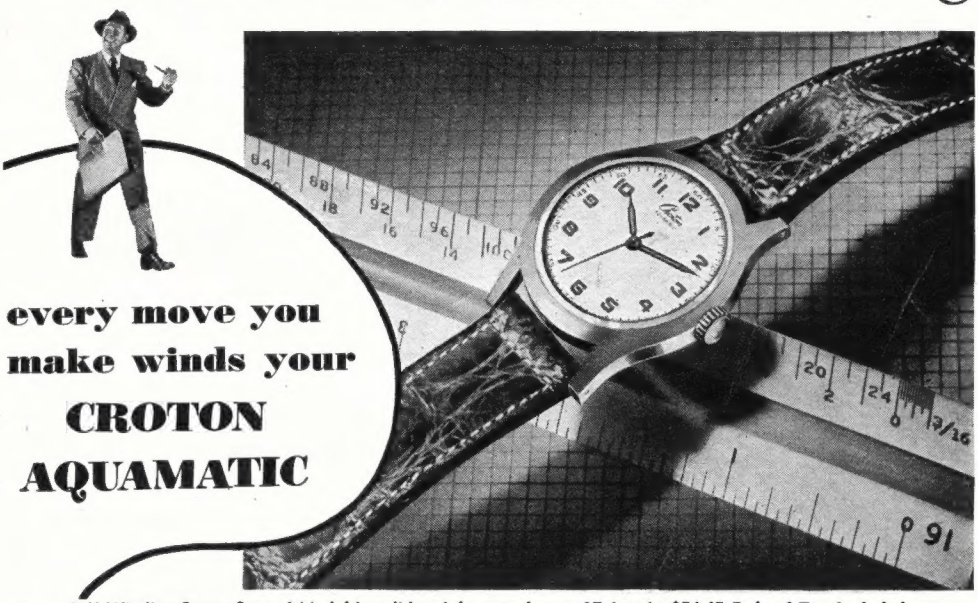
*Name*_____

*Address*_____ *City*_____

*Position*_____ *Age*_____

13.5%

more accuracy without winding



every move you make winds your CROTON AQUAMATIC

Self-Winding Sweep Second Model in solid stainless steel case. 17 Jewels, $54.45 *Federal Tax Included.*

You never have to wind your CROTON AQUAMATIC because whatever you do winds it for you! Turn the pages of your magazine . . . take a stroll through the woods — each natural wrist movement keeps your watch wound just right. It can't run down, can't overwind. That's why your CROTON AQUAMATIC gives *13.5% more accuracy* than hand-wound watches! Insist on Croton, world famous since 1878.

Croton
AQUAMATIC
THE WORLD'S MOST CAREFREE WATCH

3 Aquamatics were tested against the average of 9 famous watches wound by hand, in a 30-day wearing test by a leading laboratory. *Aquamatic proved 13.5% more accurate!*

Douse it! Drench it! Soak it!

Your handsome CROTON AQUAMATIC keeps telling you the right time in hot, cold, salt or fresh water. Even perspiration can't harm — because every CROTON AQUAMATIC is *certified waterproof* by the United States Testing Co., Inc., before it goes to your jeweler. All you need do is make sure only a Croton jeweler opens, closes, and services it. You'll revel in AQUAMATIC's other knock-about features, too — dust-proof, shock-resistant, radium dial, and a glass crystal that can't be shattered! Write for free booklet. CROTON WATCH CO., INC., 48 West 48th St., New York 19.

HOW TO CLEAN A GUN AT NIGHT!

IT'S NIGHT. You've just returned to camp with your "bag." You'll be shooting again tomorrow *but* . . . you know if you don't clean your gun *tonight,* it may become "pitted." Better have a flashlight handy to help. Better be sure your flashlight is powered with "Eveready" batteries . . . Powerful, dependable, *they outlast all other brands!**

PLACE A SMALL PIECE OF WHITE PAPER in the breech of your gun. Then direct the beam of your flashlight on the paper. *Now* you can see through the barrel clearly . . . to be sure the gun is thoroughly cleaned and ready for tomorrow's "shooting."

● Brighter light, longer life! That's what you want in a flashlight battery. And that's what you get with "Eveready" brand batteries. Laboratory tests prove it. And the best "laboratory" of all — *your own flashlight* — proves it! That's why "Eveready" batteries *outsell* all other brands — because they *outlast* all other brands!*

Proof! . . . in the laboratory . . . in your own flashlight . .

"EVEREADY" BATTERIES OUTLAST ALL OTHER BRANDS!*

******According to the "General-Purpose 4-Ohm Intermittent Test" of the American Standards Association, which most closely approximates average use.*

The registered trade-mark "Eveready" distinguishes products of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.
30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation
UCC